

The Bookman is a dangerous companion.

A close-up photograph of a man's face, looking slightly to the right. He is behind a dark, textured wire mesh that covers the entire image. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on his face and deep shadows in the background.

Bye-bye, Bookman

a Fraser/Vecchio story
by Muriel Perun

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Cover by Laura Shapiro

WARNING: This fanzine contains same-sex, adult-oriented material. It will not knowingly be sold to anyone under the age of eighteen.
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Available From:
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Looking into the bathroom mirror, Ray Vecchio straightened his tie. Silver tie, white shirt, silver-gray suit cut special so his holster wouldn't show. Looking damn pretty good, considering. He ran a finger across his upper lip. Though Ray had quit wearing it a year ago, his skin still remembered the weight of that thin mustache.

Around the corner, a toilet flushed and Officer O'Doul came out to wash his hands. He stopped dead when he saw Vecchio there and flushed scarlet. Ray stepped back to give him room at the sink.

"You ready, O'Doul?" he asked, trying to sound friendly.

O'Doul flushed redder and hunched over the faucet. "J-just a minute, sir," he stammered.

Ray passed a hand over his shorn head and took one last glance in the mirror before walking out into the hall. "I'll wait for you outside," he said crisply.

Ray had no patience with O'Doul's timidity, although the youngster wasn't the only one who cringed when Ray spoke. The way everybody acted, you'd think he was still the Bookman. But in his heart he understood. He was more of a legend than a person these days, and part of him liked things that way. When the mirror showed him his own face, he could see why they all feared him. His cheeks were gaunt, his eyes looked cold and hollow, even haunted, and Ray knew they only reflected the truth. He'd learned a lot in his year away. He didn't take shit from anybody anymore. It wasn't easy to change from the king of Vegas to a respectful public servant. He'd had more serious run-ins with Welsh in the past year than all his other years on the force combined.

For a year he had played a monster. Not played—he'd *been* the monster. He'd worn the monster's suits, shirts, cologne—Christ, even his underwear. All the difference between him and that dead man had

been a little line of fake hair across his upper lip. He'd looked like the monster, smelled like him. And worst of all he'd thought like him, with only an occasional clench of adrenaline to remind him he was human.

In his heart, he knew he had never really come back from that last assignment. He looked like Ray Vecchio, walked and talked and dressed like Ray Vecchio, but he looked like a dead gangster named Armando Langoustini, too. Maybe that's who he really was. Not that it felt so bad to be that guy—he felt tough inside, like no one could really get to him ever again.

Ray grabbed the file off his desk and went to peer through the one-way mirror into the dim interview room. The young guy sitting there was staring blankly at the mirror. Ray wondered how the kid could stand to look at himself. His greasy hair stuck up in weird shapes, and he hadn't shaved in a while. His shirt was soaked with sweat. Ray didn't want to talk to the guy, but he had to follow through on the case, since he had made the collar. He shrugged to suppress a shudder of distaste, remembering how much the guy stank when they had cornered him in that abandoned building where he'd been hiding out for a week. It reminded Ray of that crappy place on Racine where Fraser used to live.

Fraser... A picture rose unbidden in his mind. How long had it been since Ray had called anybody a friend? *Forget it, chump*, he thought. *You'll never see that guy again.*

Ray looked around impatiently for O'Doul. The young cop was supposed to sit in on this interview, but he was nowhere to be seen. He was probably still in the can, flossing or some damn thing. God only knew why Welsh was forcing Ray to help train a couple of young kids. Actually, Ray knew why—Welsh was trying to push him into supervision so he could advance his career, something Ray had no interest in at all right now. He reached for the doorknob. Screw O'Doul. Better interview this creep before he got lawyered up.

It was gratifying to see the perp snap to attention, his eyes full of fear, when Ray walked in the door. "Raymond Malatesta," Ray said, reading from the file. "Shoplifting and assault while underage, two years in Juvie. You're only 26 and you got two priors in the last seven years for armed robbery. Looks like this could be strike three. You're about to throw your life away, kid." He glanced up suddenly to look the guy straight in the eyes, pinning him with his glare. Malatesta looked down at his trembling hands. Ray tossed the file on the table. "Unless, of course, you want to tell me who was the guy with the piece, the guy who took the money and left you for a sucker. He's the one who should go down, Raymond."

"I don't know his last name. He's just some guy I met."

"Where?" Ray snapped.

"Some bar downtown."

Ray laughed dangerously. "What kind of shit are you trying to pull here, Malatesta? You don't know the guy's name, and you don't remember where you met him? Listen, you asshole, you come into my neighborhood and you pull a job like this at a store on my corner, you scare an old man half to death—"

Malatesta was staring at Ray in horror. "Oh, Christ," he said, "you're Ray Vecchio."

Ray laughed again. Sometimes he liked this reputation he was getting.

Malatesta seemed to be speaking to the table on which his clenched fists rested. "Oh, man, my ma knows your ma, and I think you knew my older brother Mike in high school."

Ray remembered Mike Malatesta, a short, lanky guy a year behind him who kept to himself and took a lot of heat for having soft, pretty looks like a girl and being shitty at sports. Turned out later he was gay, which is what everyone in high

school called him anyway.

"So, what's the story, Malatesta?" Ray said viciously. "You trying to tell me that you're a fairy, too? I'm not interested. I wanna know who you did that job with."

Malatesta shook his head. "Look, Detective Vecchio, I swear on my mother's life I don't know that guy's name. Maybe they know him down at the Pastime. That's where I met him. See, I'm coming clean!" His voice rose in desperation and he half rose from his seat.

"Siddown!" Ray shouted.

Malatesta cringed back into his chair. "You gotta believe me," he said. "You and me, we're from the same neighborhood. My ma sees your family at the store. We even got the same name, you and me. You were friends with my brother, right? You gotta—"

Ray felt cold anger sheet through him. "Your brother was a faggot and I hated him just like everyone else," he said quietly. "And I don't gotta do nothing." Taking Malatesta by the arm, Ray dragged him out of his chair and slammed him into the wall with his arm twisted behind him. "You're not like me. You're nothing like me, you and your cocksucker brother. Don't you talk about my mother. You hear me? You hear?"

Malatesta was screaming and sobbing, pleading with Ray to let go of his arm, but Ray hardly heard him. He twisted harder, and right when he pulled Malatesta's head back to slam it into the wall, there was a rush of air and strong hands were yanking them apart.

"Vecchio, what the hell's wrong with you?" Jack Huey was shouting into his face.

Shoving Jack's hands off his shoulders, Ray lurched out into the hall, where Lieutenant Welsh blocked his way. "Mr. Malatesta's lawyer is here. Huey, you take over the Malatesta case."

"But—"

"Shut up, Detective Vecchio. My office. Now."

Vecchio stood waiting in front of Welsh's desk. Welsh was so mad he didn't even sit down.

"Okay, Vecchio, what part of 'don't do that interview alone' didn't you understand?"

"None of it, sir. I just—"

"That was a rhetorical question, Detective. Just shut up and listen to me. What you were doing doesn't help our case, and it doesn't help the old man who got robbed, and it doesn't help the reputation of this department. It's been a year now since you got back, and I was willing to cut you a little slack, but you've been pulling stunts like this all year, and this is the worst incident yet. I'm not going to stand for it anymore.

"You're suspended."

The words hung in the air and resounded in Ray's ears like a death knell.

Welsh sighed. "Dammit, Vecchio, you've been here almost 20 years. You gave up a year of your life to that undercover operation, and I won't forget that, but I think something happened to your head out there in the desert. I've been asking you to go to a shrink for a year. Now I'm making it a condition of your reinstatement. You're suspended for a month, and you go see this guy"—he handed Vecchio a business card—"two or three times a week during that time, or you don't come back here." He sat heavily in his desk chair. "You have to get rid of whatever it is that's bugging you, Vecchio," he said softly, his voice a bit hoarse. "I swear, I'll kick you off the force if something doesn't change.

"Your shield, on my desk, now," Welsh said, pointing to the spot. "Your shield and your gun."

The chime sounded, bringing Kevin Marsh out of his concentration. His new client was right on time. That was usually the case with cops. Putting his book aside,

he hit the buzzer to let the guy in and watched with that little thrill of anticipation he always felt when awaiting a new client. Who would this guy be? He hadn't even talked to him, because the HR department had set up the appointment. Whatever made this guy tick, whatever made him happy or depressed, whatever he couldn't get out of his system or couldn't live without, Kevin wanted to know. Most of all, he wanted to unravel the guy's problem little by little as he sorted out his own reactions to whatever he was about to hear.

The guy was tall and thin, and he clearly took pride in his appearance. His head was nearly shaved, and even a fashion failure like Kevin could tell that his coat and scarf and the suit under them had cost a pile. He wondered for a fleeting moment if this were the kind of cop who got rich on bribes, but he reprimanded himself. It was too soon to form judgements like that.

"Detective Vecchio, right? Kevin Marsh. Pleased to meet you." Vecchio's handshake was brief but firm, his hand warm to the touch. Kevin offered the man a seat with a wave of his hand and noted that Vecchio removed his coat and folded it carefully before choosing the high armchair instead of the low couch. He was used to being in control, this one, and, no matter how bad things were, he had no intention of wallowing. "So, what brings you here—may I call you Ray?"

"Sure, why not?" Vecchio's voice, when it came, showed his urban origins. It sounded sarcastic and disinterested, as if he was just here to while away a little time, but his body language said something else. Sitting with his legs crossed, he looked fierce and intimidating, ready to spring out of the chair if he heard something he didn't like.

"What can I do for you?"

Vecchio shrugged. "Probably nothing," he said, drumming his fingers. He glanced at a framed poster from a Salvador Dali show that hung near the door, grimaced, and looked away.

"I walked right into that one," Kevin said wryly. "Let's try again. Can you tell me why you're here?"

"Yeah. My Lieutenant made me come. He said I have to come twice a week for the next month."

"Why?"

"So I can get my shield back," Vecchio said, fixing him with a piercing gaze. "There's nothing wrong with me, see? I've just been a little nervous since I got back from an undercover assignment."

"How long ago was that?"

Vecchio's eyes flicked away. "A year."

Bingo, thought Kevin.

Vecchio shifted in his chair. "Look I don't know you from Adam. I feel like an idiot sitting here. What the hell am I supposed to say?" He folded his arms tight against his chest. "I'll tell you right now, we're not talking about my mother."

"Say whatever you want to say. There aren't any rules." Kevin fingered the gold loop in his left ear. What could he do to put this guy at ease?

"See, I don't wanna say nothing. That's the problem. I gotta sit here for an hour, and I got nothing to say."

They sat in silence for a while, and Kevin realized that Vecchio had railroaded the interview. Now Kevin was the one who felt nervous and out of place, while Vecchio had relaxed his long arms out along the arms of the chair. "Fifty minutes, actually," Kevin blurted suddenly, feeling at a loss.

"Excuse me?"

"A psychiatric appointment lasts fifty minutes."

Ray snorted. "You're kiddin' me. Fifty minutes for what you get paid?"

"Yep, I earn the big bucks, so I have to do something." They laughed together for a second, or, rather, Kevin chuckled and Ray smiled. "Come on, Ray. Help me earn it. At least tell me a little about yourself.

The clock is ticking. What's important to you in life? What do you care about more than anything else?"

"My family," Vecchio answered without hesitation. His chin was tilted up defiantly, as if challenging Kevin to make something out of it.

"Okay," Kevin said cautiously. Some instinct told him not to go there for the moment, and he followed it. "What about your job?"

"That comes next." The answers were laconic, but at least the man was talking.

"And what do you do for fun?"

Vecchio snorted derisively. "I used to work on my car. I follow some sports, watch a little T.V., gamble a little. What does anybody do?"

Kevin thought of his snowboarding trip the weekend before and smiled. "Why don't you work on your car anymore?"

"That's a long story."

Vecchio's eyes were wary, and Kevin sensed a tender spot. He made a show of looking at his watch. "We have forty minutes. Is that long enough?"

The detective sighed. "It was a 1971 Buick Riviera, in mint condition. A friend of mine burned it up. Well, actually, an arsonist who had it in for us did it. I was undercover at the time. Before that I had two other cars, just the same. The first one... This is hard to explain. I had to shoot it. The second one blew up when some local mobster planted a bomb in it. He was trying to kill me, but he killed another cop instead."

Kevin stared at him, a little overwhelmed. "So what are you driving now?"

"Some piece of crap from the motor pool. When I got back from undercover and found out that the last Riv was gone—well, I figured enough was enough. It was always getting the windows shot out anyway, and I was always worrying about it, and Fraser was always—" He stopped suddenly and his eyes got wide, as if he had said more than he meant to say.

Kevin pounced on it. "Who's Fraser?"

Vecchio shrugged again. "An ex-partner of mine. He had some crazy ideas. Real smart guy, but he was always risking my life, screwing me over for something he believed in."

"Where is he now?" Kevin took a leap, responding to something in Vecchio's voice. "Did he die?"

For an instant Vecchio looked him right in the eyes. "Nah, he's alive. He's somewhere out in the Northwest Territories, I guess. He and the guy who replaced me went off on an 'adventure.' Whatever the hell that means." Looking down at his very expensive shoes, Vecchio smiled to himself, and that smile was so rueful and self-deprecating and full of regret that Kevin's heart went out to the man. He could reach this guy, he knew he could.

"So, what did you do on your undercover assignment?"

"Can't talk about that," Vecchio said firmly, staring at the closed blinds as if he could see right through them.

"Sure you can. This is a confidential interview."

"Did you ever hear of a supoen?" Vecchio asked contemptuously. "Or the Watergate burglars? There are ways."

Kevin smiled. The man was so serious, and so angry. Really, he was a little scary, too. Kevin bet he didn't live with anyone. "That's pretty unlikely, isn't it? What's so important about what you could tell me that someone would want to supoen it?" Kevin opened his mouth to continue and closed it as an idea struck him. Somehow, Vecchio had railroaded the interview again. "The who, what, when, and where don't really matter to the work we're going to do in here," he said, feeling back on track. "What I need to know is what it did to you, how you felt about it. That's all."

Vecchio looked doubtful. "I guess I can tell you a couple of things," he said grudgingly. "I was deep undercover impersonating a big mobster for a year. At the end of that time, just before the payoff—which I can't tell you what it was—my cover got blown. A lot of those mob guys who trusted me would love to find me now, and one of these days, one of them will."

"What's making you 'nervous,' Ray? Is it what happened to you during your time undercover, or the fact that you might be in danger?"

"I don't know." Vecchio's green eyes got vague. He was lost in his own thoughts. Kevin asked a question just to break him out of his reverie.

"Who blew your cover? How did it happen?"

For the second time Vecchio looked straight into his eyes, and it wasn't a comfortable feeling to be the subject of that piercing gaze. "It was Fraser. Him and his dumb-ass partner walked into a hotel room and said hello to me, just like that."

"Were they unaware that you were undercover?"

"Nah, the partner was supposed to be impersonating me, and I made the Lieutenant promise he'd tell Fraser why I disappeared like that."

Something about that bothered Kevin, and it took him a moment to figure out what. "Was Fraser away when you left on your assignment? You didn't say good-bye to him before you left?"

"It came up kinda fast," Vecchio said, smiling. "And I knew I'd be back." His smile faded. "What I didn't know was that the department would replace me with a pathetic asshole with blonde hair and glasses, who looks about as much like me as Fraser does."

"Fraser looks like you?" Sometimes Kevin asked a stupid question intentionally if it echoed what his client said. Someone's gut reaction to an annoying question could be more

revealing than a well-thought-out answer. This time Kevin got plenty of bang for his buck.

Vecchio sat forward in the chair, his face darkened with fury. "Fraser," he said, "is one of those guys that all the women go for. He's my height, got pale skin and dark hair that he combs into some sort of square shape that would look asinine on anyone else. So would his stupid, fucking bright red Mountie uniform, but somehow he pulls it all off and everyone thinks he's an angel from heaven." He stopped and looked down at the floor. "Goddamn it," he said forcefully.

"Your friend is a Mountie?" Kevin asked stupidly, and this time it wasn't a ploy.

Vecchio stood and looked down at him with a twisted smile. His face looked so open, so full of naked pain, that Kevin's heart went out to him again. "Yeah, Fraser is a Mountie," he said clearly, as if speaking to an idiot child, "and your fifty-minute hour is twenty minutes long today." He went out the door so fast that Kevin didn't even have time to protest. He wondered if he'd ever see Vecchio again.

From the outer door of Kevin's office building, Ray emerged explosively into the sunlit Chicago street. If the door had been slammable, he would have slammed it. His blood was boiling, and all because Kevin had made him bring up Fraser. It was his own fault, really. He shouldn't think about those times. They were all over now.

Suck it up, Vecchio, he told himself. *You know you gotta go back there another day if you want your shield.* Next time he'd keep his cool. He wouldn't let that punk with the earring get to him again.

Ray had to stop for a minute and think where he'd left his car, something that hardly ever happened to him. Just standing there on the sidewalk watching people go

about their business finally started to calm him down. It was all right. Nothing had really happened. The guy had just gotten his goat, was all.

He spotted his car at the end of the block and walked over to it. Starting it up to drive home, he still felt nervous and uneasy. He'd just told a stranger that family was the most important thing to him, but he hadn't visited them in close to two months. They were still upset with him for taking that undercover assignment, leaving them at the mercy of an arsonist. Add to that all the nagging about getting married again, and he didn't really enjoy his time with his mother anymore. Maybe some of that had blown over by now. Frannie had asked him weeks ago to hang a couple of pictures in her room. Maybe, if he did it, he could clear the air a little.

He stopped home to change out of his suit and get his toolbox, and headed for the Vecchio house.

Ma was in the kitchen, and in the moment before she kissed him hello she gave him a look he couldn't figure out. It was a little appraising and a little furtive, as if she'd rather not have him in the house at that particular moment. He put the toolbox on the kitchen table and opened it, pulling out a hammer and a stud finder.

"I was gonna hang those pictures for Frannie. Is she around?"

Ma shook her head, but she didn't mean that Frannie wasn't home. "Oh, Raimondo, why don't you come home more often? Frannie's upstairs, but you won't need those tools. It's already taken care of. *Stai mangiare in casa stasera, no?*

"Sure, Ma, I'll stay for dinner," Ray agreed. He heard voices upstairs. Frannie was with someone—a male someone. "I'll go say hello to her, anyway." He dropped the tools back into the box and went upstairs, stepping lightly, guiltily aware that he was trying to

make as little noise as possible.

Frannie's door was ajar, and Ray heard her voice, excited and happy, and then the sound of a hammer. He pushed the door open and stood there as the three people inside turned to look at him and then stopped as if paralyzed.

"Hello, Ray," Frannie said a little too heartily.

"Ah, Detective Vecchio," said Turnbull, holding a hammer suspended in mid-stroke, "I hope you don't think it was forward of me to offer to help your sister with something in her room. I mean, a room is a private place, and an older brother might misunderstand—quite understandably, of course—"

"Shut up, Rennie," said Francesca. "He doesn't care about you."

"Hello, Ray," Fraser said quietly.

Ray felt his whole body tense up as he folded his arms against his chest. "Fraser," Ray said. "When did you get back to Chicago?"

"About two weeks ago." Fraser looked as discomforted as Ray had ever seen him. His mouth hung slightly open as he stared at Ray. His jeans, flannel shirt and leather jacket looked drab beside Turnbull's reds. "Uh, about my presence in your family home. You see, mathematics not being his strong point, Constable Turnbull asked me to accompany him here to aid him in hanging a few pictures for Francesca."

"What math?" Vecchio asked irritably. "All you got to do is find the stud and measure."

"Measurement is not Constable Turnbull's strong point," Fraser said, looking at the man in question a bit apologetically. "He has many other fine qualities, however."

Fraser's presence seemed to loom over him. It was too much to bear. Ray turned and walked out of the room, only to find Fraser at his elbow. "Look, Fraser, you

don't have to talk to me. If you didn't want to bother to tell me you were in town, then fine. Hey, is Turnbull interested in Frannie? 'cause if he is—"

"I'm sorry, Ray. I didn't contact you because I wasn't sure what to say."

"How about, 'Hi, Ray, I left you in a hospital bed with a bullet in you that you took for me, and you never heard from me again'? Look, Fraser, I don't really care. I got lots of other shit on my mind, okay? Just finish what you're doing and get out."

"Your mother has asked us to dinner."

"Oh, great. I need some air." Ray sped down the stairs and out the front door with Fraser right behind him.

"Would you like to take a walk, Ray?" Fraser asked coaxingly.

Ray turned to answer him and saw Frannie peeking out of the upstairs window and two neighbors staring from their habitual living room vantage points. "I got a better idea," he said. He got in his car and drove away, leaving Fraser standing at the curb. He'd get the tool box later.

Standing at the curb watching Ray's car speed off, Fraser felt a sad conviction confirmed. He had known Ray wouldn't want to speak to him, but he hadn't been able to resist coming to Ray's house and making contact with the family again, thus seeming to be closer to the man himself. Fraser was disappointed with himself for the subterfuge. Turnbull had asked for help, that was true, but Fraser had used that errand as an excuse to advance his own sentimental agenda. That wouldn't do at all.

He turned to go back into the house. There was no use gaping after Ray like a fool, accentuating his rudeness in leaving. He had to be a good guest, and he had to stay for dinner. He couldn't be rude to Mrs. Vecchio, who was probably already distressed by her son's abrupt departure. But, after tonight, Fraser would not

return here again. He'd have a talk with Turnbull about courting Francesca without a chaperone in the future. Things were just different in Chicago, and after several years in the States Turnbull needed to adjust.

Frannie poked her head out the door as Fraser reached the top step. "I'm gonna kill him," she said fervently.

"There's no need to be angry, Francesca," he said, forcing a smile. "Ray simply had some other pressing matters to take care of."

"Yeah, right," she said, letting him pass and shutting the door behind him. "He left his tools on the kitchen table, he was so pressed. I'd like to press that toolbox right on his head."

Fraser smiled at her original location. Francesca sold herself short. She had an inventive mind. Undisciplined, but inventive.

He went back upstairs to help Turnbull finish. He swept up the bits of plaster and paint and helped determine when the pictures were level before they both moved the furniture back to its place. He remembered moving the furniture in this room three years before, tearing down the pictures and the curtains, rifling through the drawers looking for a key. And then two years ago, struggling through the smoke-filled rooms trying to find Francesca. The pictures were only being replaced now on the freshly plastered and painted walls.

Shouldn't he just go? Hadn't he only brought tragedy to this home? It was strange being here, strange and pointless.

Francesca had fallen in love with him four years before, but he had already been in love with Ray. Victoria had started his and Ray's close friendship on a long process of disintegration, culminating in Ray's departure. Now there was no place for him in Ray's life, and Francesca had a chance for happiness with Turnbull. He wouldn't even dwell on what had

happened between himself and Ray Kowalski, whom he had stupidly seen as his last chance for happiness. Where did Fraser fit in? Nowhere. Only someplace where everyone was a stranger.

After dinner, he would go where he'd gone every almost every night since he'd been back, although he knew he was on a fruitless quest. At least it was loud and anonymous, and he could lose himself in the crowd for a while.

When Mrs. Vecchio called them for dinner, Fraser squared his shoulders and put a smile on his face before going down. No one needed to know the disappointment he felt.

Once at home, Ray didn't know what to do with himself. If he had been a drinking man, this would be a night to spend bending his elbow in some dive on the South Side. But he wasn't a drinking man, and there wasn't anything on T.V., so there was only one thing he could think of doing. He picked up the phone.

"Hey, Stellina," he said affectionately, relieved to hear her voice and not her secretary's.

"Ray." She sounded a little surprised, maybe not displeased.

"I got an idea. How about dinner and maybe a little dancing later? I'll pick you up at work. What do you say?"

"Ray, it's Tuesday night." Now she sounded annoyed.

"I know. That's better. We'll have the place to ourselves."

She laughed. "You're a nut, Raymond. Look, I have a brief to finish by 8:00 tonight, but I'll come over after, okay? Can we order Chinese?"

He felt himself start to relax all over. "Whatever you say, baby. Chinese it is. You lawyers have the damndest deadlines."

"That's rich, coming from a cop. See you around 8:30."

Hanging up, Ray started to feel better. If

Stella came that late, she'd stay. He wouldn't have to be alone tonight.

Sitting back on the sofa, he started flicking channels on the remote, but nothing caught his eye. He kept thinking about Fraser and Turnbull in Frannie's room. It looked like Turnbull was interested in his sister. Well, that was nice for her. She wasn't getting any younger, and Fraser was never going to fall on her plate. Turnbull was dumb as a door, but he wouldn't cheat on her like her first had done. She could have her big, strong, dumb ox of a guy and control him. That was the problem with Fraser—he was too smart for her. But look at what he'd fallen for—Victoria. Jesus. And he had bad taste in partners, too—he went off with Kowalski, who could probably barely tie his own shoelaces. Imagine a cop who needed glasses to shoot straight, and he never wore them. What a chump. But he knew how to keep Fraser as his partner, didn't he?

Thoughts he'd had a thousand times, jealous thoughts, whispered to him. Fraser had seen something in Kowalski that he hadn't seen in Vecchio, something he wanted in a partner. It hurt to think about someone else at Fraser's side, doing all the things they used to do. Hell, they'd probably rebuilt Fraser senior's cabin by now. They'd probably saved each other's lives a hundred times, solved a bunch of cases.

In reality, Ray had no idea what their lives had been like. After that last phone call a year ago, Fraser had never called again. So what was he doing back now? Was he planning on working with Kowalski at the 27th? Ray sighed and shook his head at the thought. Maybe that's what all the "let's take a walk" bullshit had been about. Maybe Fraser wanted to pretend they were still friends before he went and made Ray's working life a living hell.

Of course, their split had been Ray's

fault. He could chalk it to up to duty, but when he was honest with himself he knew he'd needed to get away when that assignment had come down. He'd never thought that Fraser's new partner would "take." Fraser would always just be there. Yeah, right. And then there was the craziness that was Ray and Stella.

When he met her, he'd fallen hard. When he collapsed and had to be rushed back to the hospital for surgery, he'd had such a weird dream about her. Ray wasn't prone to visions, but this fever-and-drug-induced dream had been vivid enough to be real. Instead of having the operation, he'd coughed until that bullet came right up his throat, and then he'd married Stella and quit the force, and they moved to Florida, where they opened a bowling alley. He remembered lying there in a drugged stupor babbling to Fraser about it the last time Fraser called before going off into the tundra with Kowalski. Hell, maybe Fraser had believed it. Ray smiled in spite of himself. Even Fraser couldn't be that dumb.

So he and Stella had started an affair as soon as Ray could move without bursting his stitches. For a while it had looked like the real thing, but there was something unsaid between them, something that didn't work. Ray figured that on her side, it was Stanley. She just wasn't over him yet. On his side, it was... Who knows what? He'd always known that part of the attraction was that she was Kowalski's ex, but he thought he'd moved past that pretty fast. They had a lot more in common than their work. They both liked to dress well, go out to eat at good places and dance until late. But something kept them from being really close. For some reason, as much as Ray liked being around her, they didn't see each other all that much anymore.

Ray was looking forward to seeing her tonight. He got the takeout menu and started looking through it.

Stella's phone rang as soon as she put it down, and she picked it up impatiently, still

staring at the screen in front of her. "I have a collect call for anyone from Ray Kowalski. Will you accept the charges?"

"Yes," Stella said automatically. She heard a hiss of static that had gathered itself over many frozen miles.

"Stella, thank god it's you."

She nearly dropped the receiver when she heard his voice. "Stanley?"

"Don't call me Stanley. I'm Ray now." The familiar protest made her smile.

"The hell you are. I've known you since you were a kid. I was willing to call you Ray when you were supposed to be Ray Vecchio, but—" Then she remembered where he was, and why he was there, and her smile faded. Stella had been more hurt than she wanted to admit when he'd gone off with Fraser. If she hadn't had Ray Vecchio to distract her, she would have felt abandoned, irrational as she knew that was. "What do you want, Stanley?"

"Listen, Stell, I'm in Toronto. I don't know what the hell to do."

"What's the matter?" Stella felt herself getting sucked in. She should hang up now, but she didn't.

"I got no money—I just barely made it here. It took me a month to hitchhike down here. I had to stop a couple of times to do some odd jobs for money, and..."

"What happened to Fraser?" she asked, suddenly frightened. "Is he hurt? Are you okay?"

"No, he's okay. And I'm good. Well, as good as you can be when you're in the tundra and you get dumped, and then you walk out on the guy and you realize there's no fucking place to go. So I make my dramatic exit, and—there I am, in the middle of nowhere."

"Back up, Stanley. What happened?"

"So, things were going all right. I mean, I thought they were. You know that feeling you have, when everything's just humming along and—"

"Stanley, I have work to do." She tapped her manicured nails on the edge of the keyboard.

"Okay, okay. Three weeks ago, Fraser gets up out of bed. He's in bed with *me*, you know? And it isn't even morning, and he gets up and he says, 'Ray, after much soul searching, I've realized that I can't be with you like this any more. I realized that it was really Ray Vecchio I wanted to be with, and I made a mistake in leaving with you.' So I say, 'Jesus, Fraser, nothing like waiting a year to tell me, and anyway, Ray Vecchio will punch your lights out if you lay a finger on his precious ass.' And he looks at me funny, and he says, 'I know, Ray, but it's not fair to you.' So I say, 'Go ahead and be unfair to me, Fraser. I'm having a good time.' 'I can't do that, Ray.' And that was it. He said I could stay on as his friend, but he wasn't sleeping with me anymore. So I walked out on him. Soul searching—ain't that rich? I think the sonofabitch never had a soul to begin with. His heart is as cold as—as—as snow," he finished lamely.

Stella sympathized even as she felt smug for having told him so. "Oh, Stanley," she said. "What a mess."

"It gets worse. After I left, I'm slogging around, freezing my ass off, trying to hitch a ride, and I'm thinking, 'What the hell was I doing there?' I mean, it was like Fraser hypnotized me or something, and when I got away I broke the spell. He's right. It could never have worked. I'm not even gay. At least, I don't think I'm gay. Do you think I'm gay, Stella?"

Stella started to feel exasperated. He had been gay enough to live with the guy for a year. "It doesn't matter. What do you want me to do, Stanley?"

"Come up here, Stella. We'll hang around Toronto a little, have some laughs, and then we'll go home. I'm still on leave from my old precinct, so I can go back there to work. I hate it up here, you know? I really do. I really missed Chicago, Stell, but I missed you more."

"You mean it?" Stella sighed. She knew she was going to fall for it again. Why couldn't she ever get this guy out of her system? Why couldn't she feel this way about Ray Vecchio? He'd marry her in a minute—she was sure of it. It might even work between them, but somehow she still resisted. On the other hand, she and Stanley had been an unqualified disaster, but there was something, just something, that kept her hanging on.

"Sure, of course I mean it. I can't wait to see you." She heard the intimate tone in his voice she had loved for all those years. "Listen, I'm sorry about this. Just one thing, Stella, listen. Are you still seeing Vecchio?"

She thought of what she was going to do that night and felt a little guilty. "Sometimes."

"Well, if you do, don't tell him what Fraser said about wanting him. I don't feel like Fraser wants him to know. I don't want him to know, you know?"

"Why not?" she asked, stiffening.

"It's the partner thing, you know? Frase was my partner—I mean like cop partner, not gay partner—well, he was that, too—and I don't want him to get hurt. I don't want him to bang his head against a brick wall—that's Vecchio. Vecchio's gonna tell him to shove it if he finds out."

She smiled indulgently. "Yeah," she said, "okay."

"Okay, good. So, what flight you gonna catch?"

Stella wasn't doing the booking herself—she'd just call her travel agent—so she daydreamed a little as Stanley talked about flight times and airlines. When Stanley had left with Fraser, she had known it was none of her business what he did with whom, but she had done a lot of thinking about whether the way she had treated him had soured him on women altogether. She had remembered a lot of

things about him that weren't so bad. In fact, she'd remembered why she'd fallen in love with him, and it had nothing to do with what had happened that long-ago day at the bank. He was crazy, sure, but he was a good cop and a good man. He'd even handled that left-field assignment to impersonate Vecchio pretty well. At least he wasn't a macho asshole like so many other guys she'd dated. There were days when she'd put Vecchio in that category, though. Maybe that was why she couldn't get serious with him.

When she'd broken up with Stanley, she thought she had all the time in the world to find someone else. Now it seemed that the years were passing pretty fast. She still had feelings for Stanley. Maybe this was their big chance to work it out.

"Call me at work tomorrow," she said. "I'll let you know what flight I'll be on."

She hung up, feeling a veil of confusion descend over her brain. Was she doing the right thing, or was she opening herself up to more heartache? Should she really go through with her date with Vecchio? For them, a date usually meant sex and not much else. With an irritated shake of her head, she started typing away again, conscious of her impending deadline, and then stopped, catching a glimpse of her tired reflection in the screen. Oh, hell, why not? Maybe Stanley had just asked her up there to help him get home. All her faint hopes about him might just be a pipe dream. And Ray Vecchio had meant a lot to her over the past year—she wanted to see him, and she needed to say good-bye to him. It wouldn't be fair to let him down over the phone. Despite his macho side and his temper, he could be one of the most passionate men she knew. She could use a little of that right now.

When Stella arrived at Ray's place, the food was ordered, the lights were low, and soft music was playing. The first thing she did was dump her briefcase on the couch and rush into the bathroom. She came out carrying her

pantyhose in one hand and her shoes in the other.

"I just couldn't wear those another second," she said.

Ray laughed. "Why do you women wear such uncomfortable stuff? For beauty, I know. It's all men's fault."

"Well, it is," she said, playfully taking the bait. "But look at you guys. Tying a noose around your neck every morning isn't exactly the smartest fashion choice." She made a motion as if she were choking herself with a rope.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But I bet it's better than pantyhose. Fraser said they pinched in all the wrong places." Damn it, why had he thought of Fraser again?

Her eyes widened. "Jesus, Ray, you never told me Fraser wore pantyhose. That explains—"

Ray laughed and shook his head. "Just once. On undercover. He had to pretend to be a woman to get into a girls' school." He saw the look on Stella's face. "Actually, it was a convent. Oh, shit, I'm making it sound worse than it was. You know Fraser—no ulterior motives, just duty." So what the hell was he doing in Chicago out of uniform? Ray suddenly wished he'd stayed long enough to find out.

Stella came up to him and touched his face. "What's wrong, Ray?"

"Ah, let's not talk about it now. Let's dance." He took her in his arms and they danced silently, moving over maybe two square feet of carpet, more interested in pressing against each other than in practicing dance steps. When the food arrived, they ate in companionable silence, and Ray was starting to feel peaceful again. Who was to say he didn't love Stella? Maybe love just didn't feel so crazy out-of-control as it used to. Maybe this ease with her, and his desire for her, maybe that was love. At the moment he felt that he could spend the rest of his life with her. He knew

he'd felt that way before and then changed his mind in the morning, but now he needed her. Maybe he was ready to settle down.

It was late, and neither one of them ate much, so Ray packed the leftovers away in the fridge. They sat together while they finished their wine—Ray could take it or leave it, but he kept some in the house for her. The music was calling to Ray, making him want to move. He stood and pulled her up unresisting after him. This time his hands began to wander, and his lips touched her temple and moved down her face to her neck. She unbuttoned his shirt and slid both hands inside, holding him around the back and kneading his shoulders. He was hard and she was rubbing herself against him. When he moved his hands down her body he realized she had nothing on under her dress. Unzipping his pants, he hiked up her dress and lifted her. She wrapped her legs around him as he lowered her down on him. She moaned and took him in, opening her mouth against his. Just lifting her in his arms he couldn't get enough purchase to really thrust, so he braced her body against the back of the couch and pressed into her hard.

She was getting wild, pulling him in with her legs and saying things, all kinds of things that didn't make sense, but he didn't care. He knew what she wanted, what he wanted, and he had her there, tilted back in the safety of his arms. She was making more passionate sounds now, with her head thrown back and her legs tight around him. He often wondered how women could give themselves up like this, could trust him with their bodies, with their pleasure. He couldn't give himself up like that. Even while he was bringing Stella to this height, a little part of him, a little bit of Ray, was standing to one side watching them both. Maybe it wasn't just that he couldn't give himself up—he couldn't respect anyone else who did it, either.

She was getting tired now, and he could tell because she finally remembered him by releasing his shoulders, which were probably

scored by her nails, and putting a hand underneath to stroke his balls. He wanted her to touch his chest, to run her manicured nails lightly over and around his nipples, but he wouldn't ask. He'd never been able to ask for things during sex—it made him feel too vulnerable.

Stella was almost limp in his arms when he let himself start to come, and it went on longer than he thought and hit with a bigger punch, so that he almost fell over with Stella in his arms. As soon as he could stand without leaning on the couch, he carried her to bed.

Sometime in the middle of the night Ray awoke with Stella straddling him. He was already hard and inside her before he was completely conscious. He loved it when she did this, loved to know how much she needed him. He could barely see her in the moonlight, but he mouthed at her breasts like ripe fruit hanging over him. He let her ride him until she was sated and lay on his chest, panting, before he rolled over on her and took his own pleasure. They slept again until morning.

He woke before she did and went to make coffee. It was barely dawn, but she'd have to leave soon if she wanted to shower and go home to get some fresh clothes. The coffee got tepid while they made love again. Ray didn't let go of her after he came. He was feeling more tender than he had felt in a long time, maybe since Ange, and he was ready to take a risk.

"Stellina," he said caressingly, "I have an idea."

"Not another idea," she said, smiling. "I don't think I have time for another idea."

"Not that kind of idea," he said, nuzzling against her hair. "I got an idea

that you should marry me."

He knew right away it had been a mistake. Her whole body stiffened, and then she stroked his face with one hand. "Oh, god, Ray, don't ask me that."

He sat up to look down at her. "Why not?"

"We're good together, but we're not like that. We never have been, except a little at the beginning." She closed her eyes and sighed and then looked at him as if gathering her courage. "I heard from Stanley."

"Oh, shit," he said violently. She sat up and reached for him, but he pulled away from her.

"It's not like that," she protested. "He needs me."

"And I don't?" Ray could feel all the tenderness drying up, getting sucked into some kind of black hole deep inside him. He felt nothing. He needed nobody. This was a stupid mistake. "Forget it," he said, rising to go shower. A sudden thought made him stop and turn towards her. "I suppose he came back with Fraser. I should have known."

She looked confused. "Fraser's here?"

"Yeah. Isn't Stanley?"

"No, he's in Toronto. He's broke. He doesn't have enough money to leave. He wants me to go up there and bring him home."

Ray was silent, taking this in. Finally he made an impatient gesture. "So wire him the money. Why do you have to go up there?"

"We're known each other since we were kids, Ray. He needs my help."

Ray snorted. "He's pathetic. But I can't believe Fraser left him alone up there."

She shrugged uneasily. "The way I heard it, he left Fraser. He couldn't stand living on the tundra another minute. And then there was..." She paused uncomfortably.

"There was what?"

"Well, their relationship, you know."

"Their what?"

"Their relationship. Don't go all dense on me, Ray."

"Fraser and Kowalski are partners. They don't have 'a relationship.'" Ray felt poised on the brink of some revelation he didn't want to have.

"Oh, for god's sake, Ray, they were lovers, right? Everybody knows about it. Well, I guess it didn't really work out that great for them in the end—what's wrong?"

Ray felt as if the air had turned to water and he was suffocating, trying to breathe in some dense element not his own. "That's a lie," he said thickly. "Fraser would never—"

She frowned impatiently. "Oh, god, Ray, sometimes you can be so oblivious."

He spun towards her with both hands outstretched, and she cringed away from him, as if he was about to hit her, twist her neck, do something terrible. And that made him twice as mad, because he would never hurt her, and why the hell didn't she know that, the bitch? Lunging past her, he seized a coffee mug and dashed it violently against the wall. Behind him he heard Stella gathering her clothes as he watched the brown stuff drip and soak into the beige rug. He turned and she cringed again.

"Goddamn it, Stella!" he shouted. "What kind of a jerk do you think I am? I'm not gonna hit you."

Her eyes were wide as she clutched her clothes against her body. "What's wrong with you, Ray? Everybody knew about them. Ask your sister. Ask Jack Huey."

In her expression Ray caught a hint of how crazy he must look. He unclenched his fists. "C'mon, Stell, you've seen me lose my temper lots of times."

"Yeah, I have," she said, looking around for her bra, "and I hate it. I hate it, Ray! What makes you think you have the right to talk to me like that? To anybody? I'm surprised you haven't been suspended or thrown in jail for contempt again." As Ray's anger cooled, Stella's seemed to take

fire.

"I have," he said. Dropping to his knees, he fished her bra out from under the bed, stood, and handed it to her.

Instead of taking it from his outstretched hand, she stared at him. "You have what?"

"I've been suspended." He dropped the bra on the bed. She picked it up mechanically.

"Oh, Ray, why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "I don't want your pity, Stella. I just want to be with you." But at the moment, he wasn't sure that was true. He wanted her, but he also wanted her out of his sight. She had just told him that Fraser was sleeping with Kowalski, and that fact sat unexamined at the back of his mind like a huge, indigestible mass. "Are you going to Canada?"

She nodded. "I don't know if I can get along with Stanley any more. But we go back so far I can't leave him alone up there."

"Why not?" Ray asked callously. "You don't seem to have any problem leaving me."

"You don't need me the way he does."

Ray snorted and turned away. He pulled a pair of pajama bottoms from a drawer of his dresser and stepped into them, feeling self-conscious. He didn't want to be naked around her anymore. "How do you know? Maybe he just whines more."

She smiled a small, weak smile that faded quickly. "You never ask me for anything. When I'm here, you sweep me off my feet. You always find some way to surprise me, and I love it, but I..."

"But you what? The way I make love to you isn't good enough for you?" Ray was heartily sick of this conversation and he felt that couldn't listen long enough to hear her answer.

"I didn't say that!" Frustrated, Stella gestured with both fists. "You never ask me to do anything to you. You never say 'grab my ass' or 'touch my—' I don't know, you don't seem to care what I do. I could just lie there and

it would be all the same to you."

Ray moved toward her, holding out his hand in a conciliatory gesture. "I like everything you do, baby."

"Yeah, but— Oh, you're missing the point." Holding her clothes, she went into the bathroom and shut the door. Ray got a towel from the linen closet and wiped down the wall, then soaked up the coffee that was staining the rug. The mug had broken into three big pieces and a lot of little shards. He'd vacuum the rug when it was dry. He expected to hear the shower running, but Stella came out dressed a minute later. She stood there watching him soak up the mess. He could tell that she was mulling something over in her mind, wondering whether to say it to him. He didn't want to hear it.

"Stella," he began, as she opened her mouth.

"No, wait. I have to ask you something. Why were you so upset when I told you about Stanley and Benton?"

"I wasn't. I mean, it's weird, that's all." He thought his head might explode if she didn't leave in the next minute.

"Yes, you were. As soon as I said it, you threw that coffee cup. I think you were—"

"Why the hell do you have to take everything apart like that? You're a lawyer, okay, swell, but I'm not one of your cases. Go analyze some defendant and leave me out of it."

She looked hurt. "I don't like to leave this way, Ray."

"Have fun in Canada," he said caustically. "I hear the people are really nice." He went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Ray sat in the shower and soaped himself until her scent was off him, and as he toweled himself dry he was a little sorry

that there was nothing to remember her by except a coffee stain on the rug. The bedroom still smelled of sex, and although he had nowhere to go, he wanted to be out of there. The habit of going to work every day forced him out the door.

Once he was outside in his car, he couldn't go to the precinct, so he rode around and visited landmarks from his life. What Stella had told him opened up a place inside Ray that he didn't like to visit. He thought of the people he'd cared about in his life: the hopes, then the betrayal and the loss. As they marched through his head, he felt empty and alone.

Ray had to face it. He'd left Fraser, dropped him flat. He hadn't been a good friend. At the time Ray had been so focused on his own shit, he hadn't even thought about it. While he was out there being the Bookman, it was as if Fraser was back in Chicago preserved in amber. But he wasn't. He had a life, too, and Stanley Kowalski had become the center of it.

Ray passed his house and saw Frannie walking to the bus stop. There was Zuko's mansion. That creep had kept a low profile since his sister's death. Sweet Irene. Ray missed her. He and Fraser and Frankie, they'd all had a hand in her death.

He didn't want to go down that particular branch of memory lane, so he rode past the precinct and then over to Racine, where he hadn't been since his return. He sat in his car across the street from Fraser's old place and contemplated the empty lot. Part of the burnt wreckage was still there, surrounded by a chain link fence and threatening signs. It looked so desolate, he wondered if they'd build anything there in his lifetime.

It was hard to connect that empty space with so many events in his life. He looked up at the air where the third floor had been. That was where he'd eaten pizza with Fraser, where he'd picked Fraser up morning after morning. Frannie had gone there to try to seduce Fraser. What a joke. Fraser had holed up there with Victoria when he was supposed to be at Ray's

disastrous party, and Victoria had shot Dief there, somewhere in that bit of air. He imagined them all moving frantically, carrying out their little purposes as if suspended in the sky behind a transparent wall. How pointless it all seemed now.

He figured he had still been in the hospital when everyone else found out about Fraser and Kowalski. How the hell had he missed it otherwise? That last time Fraser had called, when Ray had been high on his fever and the drugs, had Benny tried to tell him? He tried to think back. Fraser had said they were going off on an adventure, a new life. Hell, Benny was so prudish, that was probably the closest he could come to saying they were going off to live together. Ray shook his head. He was glad he hadn't known all that time. It sure hurt to know now. But what if he had known two years ago that Fraser might be bi? What if—

A young guy with crazed, bloodshot eyes wandered off the sidewalk and stared Ray down through his windshield. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and an open overcoat with a moth-eaten fur collar. He started drumming on the hood with his fingers, and a big grin creased his face. Ray sighed and started up the car. He couldn't do anything about this guy today—help him or throw him in jail—because he wasn't carrying that little bit of tin that his life revolved around.

Ray took one more look at the remains of Fraser's building as he pulled around the guy and away from the curb. The space where he and Fraser had been friends no longer existed. It was as dead as their friendship. God, he was getting maudlin now. He stepped on the gas, wanting to get out of Fraser's deadbeat neighborhood and clear his mind of all these depressing thoughts. Intent on his driving, he was startled when his cell phone rang.

It was Fred Morrison from Vice, asking if Ray could identify a couple of small-time mobsters from some photos. They decided to meet after lunch. At last Ray's day had a purpose. Feeling a little better to know that someone remembered he existed, he started planning the two hours before their meeting. He decided to stop at the Vecchio house and get his tools, then maybe pick up something to eat.

His tools were sitting on the floor just inside the doorway, and he would have taken them and left except that Frannie came through the door right after him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked coldly.

"Sorry about yesterday," he said lamely. "Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"You should be sorry. Ma was upset."

He trailed after her into the kitchen. "I know. It was just such a shock seeing Fraser. He never got in touch with me, all this time."

"Did you get in touch with him?"

Ray felt a flash of anger. "Did I know where he was?"

"Canada," Frannie said ingenuously. She smiled her superior smile. "You could have asked me. I knew."

Ray decided to let it go. "So, Frannie..."

"Yeah?"

"Did you know about Fraser and Kowalski?"

"What do you mean? Did I know they were an item?"

"Yeah. When did you find out?" Ray leaned against the doorjamb and folded his arms.

"Just before they left it was getting so obvious. And then when Fraser called to say they weren't coming back—well, hel-lo!" Opening the fridge, Frannie pulled out a container of leftover meat balls. "Get the bread, will you, Ray?"

Pushing off from the wall, Ray got a loaf

of Italian bread from the breadbox and pulled two plates out of the cabinet. He cut the bread into hero-sized chunks and sliced them in half. Funny, how easy it felt to be here even after all this time. "How did I miss it?" he asked, speaking to himself as much as to her. They sat down at the worn kitchen table.

Frannie shrugged and stabbed a meatball out of the container of sauce with her fork. It made a red-orange stain when she laid it on her bread and cut it in half. She handed the container to Ray, who did the same. "Two-guy stuff isn't exactly your strong point."

"You got that right. So, what do you think of it?"

She laughed out loud. "Now you're asking me? A year later? Well, I was disappointed. What did you think? They were pretty cute together, though, and Fraser and I are still friends. Too bad it didn't work out with Ray—I mean Stanley—though."

"How do you know?" Ray was toying with his food, making no move to put the top on his sandwich. "How do you know it didn't work out?"

"Fraser wrote to me. He said they were splitting up, and then he said he was coming back here."

"Why?"

"Why which one?"

"Why both? Why either?" Ray had crushed half of his bread in one fist without realizing it.

"I don't know. You'll have to ask him." Ray could see that Frannie was loving the novelty of having her brother hang on her every word. It didn't happen very often.

"Yeah, right." Ray picked up the squashed bread and put it over the meatballs and stared at it. "Like I could ever get Fraser to talk about his love life, even when he was with a woman."

Frannie took a bite of her sandwich and then spoke with her mouth full. "He's a gentleman, Ray," she said haughtily, "something you'll never understand." She swallowed and patted her lips with a napkin. "Men!"

After taking a bite of his sandwich, Ray got up and poured himself a glass of milk. There was something about the acid taste of the tomato sauce with the milk that made him feel like a kid again, but it wasn't a good feeling. Ray felt as if nothing had ever succeeded in his life. He'd had hopes and dreams, and he'd been in love, and nothing had come of any of it. He'd failed, and people had died, and people had changed. He was walking down a path he didn't want to be on, but he couldn't see any other way.

He shook his head. "It ain't just men, Frannie," he said. "It's life."

He parked his motor pool car in front of the 83rd precinct—at least Welsh hadn't asked him to give up his car and parking privileges—and jogged up the steps. He used to come here a lot when he was first on the force to visit a few old pals from the Academy. They had moved on long ago. It suddenly struck him that getting by the desk Sergeant might not be so easy without a badge. Luckily, he knew the guy and was waved on through. Ray imagined the humiliation of having to ask for Morrison and wait at the desk for him, and then being forced to tell that he was suspended. He might have walked out before going through that.

Morrison was a tall, stooped guy, taller even than Ray, with a growing pot belly and a limp handshake. His morose face was pale, and Ray remembered how he always used to start off the day closely shaved, but by the late afternoon the whiskers stood out starkly on his cheeks. It was midday, so the gray stubble was just starting to show.

"How are you, Ray?" he asked, treating Ray to a damp handshake that made him want

to wipe his hand on his pants. "I was glad to hear you got back safe. Hear you got your man, too."

"Yeah," Ray said curtly. "How's the wife?"

"Good." One thing about Morrison—he didn't dwell on information no one wanted to hear but himself. Morrison sat behind his desk and Ray at the side. "Take a look at this file of photos," he said. "Tell me if you see anybody you know."

Ray took the thick folder and started paging through slowly. "That's Reese MacDonald, but you probably know him. I thought he was dead." The picture showed a small-time hustler Ray had taken down one time. He was looking over his shoulder as he walked by some parked cars. The location was impossible to determine.

"Nope, not dead, but we heard he was in New York for a while."

"Hmmm, the Bobsey Twins. Billy Bob and Jack Bobbitt. What are they up to these days?"

"Same old stuff," Morrison said, shaking his head. "Extortion, blackmail."

Ray was in his element, scanning the photos for the lowlifes of Chicago, most of whom he'd had the pleasure of busting one time or another. While he identified guys, he and Morrison traded tidbits of information that both already knew. So far, the pictures all seemed to have different backgrounds, and, from the look of the guys Ray knew, had probably been taken over the last two years. This was just a warmup for the real thing. As Ray wondered when he'd get to the photos that mattered, he almost missed the first one.

He had the picture in his hand, about to put it face down on the pile on the desk, when he did a double take. "Manny," he said incredulously. "That's Manny Ubaldi, for Chrissakes."

Morrison leaned in, and Ray knew this was it. The photo showed a stout,

balding man in front of an ornate doorway. A bouncer stood looking at him from behind a velvet rope, and suddenly Ray knew where the picture had been taken. That door belonged to the Velvet Glove, a notorious gay club that had been raided dozens of times back in the pre-Stonewall days.

"He was a runner for Theo Jones in Vegas, just a nobody, a messenger boy," Ray said, playing the game. "I had him roughed up one time when he was flip with me and Theo never even said anything." Morrison glanced at Ray briefly, and Ray wished he'd kept the last part to himself. Who knew what these guys thought of Ray now? He'd been on the other side, and that tainted him, even if it had been for a good cause. They didn't need to know the gory details. Ray reminded himself that he'd been invited here as a tool, not as a buddy. He sensed Morrison's anticipation, so he took his time turning to the next shot.

"Holy shit," Ray whispered.

Beside him, Morrison let out a breath.

"Yeah, I thought it was him."

Ray decided to be cautious. "These were taken in Chicago?" Morrison nodded. "Recently?" He reversed the photo and looked at the date.

"Last week, at the Velvet Glove." Ray looked again at the face of Gaetano Martinetti, a drug kingpin who gave even the Bookman pause.

"The Bookman took out a contract on him," Ray said. Morrison looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Not me," Ray snapped, "the real Bookman. But they couldn't find him. After a while I lifted it when I wanted to do business with Gaetano again, and, bingo, there he was."

"You met him?"

"Yeah," Ray agreed. "He's a scary guy. Never moves without backup. Never makes a mistake. I rigged the deal we made so he would go down, but he got out of it clean. Good lawyer. His brother got killed in the capture, though. So, what's he doing in Chi—"

Absently he flipped to the next picture and stopped dead in the middle of a sentence.

"You know that guy?" Morrison asked, with renewed interest. "I didn't think he was anybody."

"He's not," Ray said quickly, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. "He's just a guy I used to know."

"Too bad." Morrison smiled a sharky smile.

"Leave him alone, Fred. He's just a guy who ain't too careful sometimes."

"Yeah, Ray, okay. We got enough on our plate without going after fairies, y'know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I do," Ray said grimly. A jolt of anger hit him in the gut, making him breathe a little harder. He'd think about it later. Not now. Back to business. "So, what's the story with Martinetti?" he asked, tamping down the feelings. "Is Manny working for him?"

Morrison shrugged. "We don't know, but it's weird that they'd both turn up at that club in the same week, considering that it don't cater to their interests."

"Manny showed up first?"

"Yeah. He might have been looking for an opening for a sale before the big guy came."

Ray nodded. "You thinking he'll be back? A guy like that don't handle his own merchandise. If you bust him you find nothing. You just get the little fish."

"Yeah, maybe. Well, listen, thanks a lot, Ray."

Ray was getting the bum's rush, and he knew it, so he decided to take his time. "What about the rest of those photos?" he asked casually, trying not to seem too eager.

"They don't matter."

Ray didn't move. "Let me look, okay?" he was still wondering why Morrison didn't want to talk about Gaetano

Martinetti.

Morrison proffered the folder again and rose from his seat. "You want a cup of coffee?"

"Nah, I'm all right." Ray paged through slowly, looking at every face. Morrison came back with a mug and waited over at another detective's desk, shooting the breeze and watching Ray out of the corner of his eye. He clearly didn't want to answer any more questions.

When Ray was done, he got up and handed the folder to Fred and kept walking towards the door.

"You find anything else?" Morrison called after him.

"Nothing that would interest you," Ray replied. But in truth he'd found a lot to interest himself. Night after night at the Velvet Glove, someone had taken pictures of everyone going in and out. Every night for a week Benton Fraser had been one of the customers, and every night he had left with a different guy.

After spending the evening alone, Ray didn't sleep most of the night, and around dawn he decided to give up and have some coffee. He sat at the kitchen table with his hands over his face, feeling the steam rise from the mug like moist breath against his skin. Christ, what a thing to find out about your friend—your best friend, the guy you rode around with and worked with and ate with for two whole fucking years. You trusted him with your life, your family home, your sister—

Ray slapped both hands down flat on the table as if the percussive sound would stop the thoughts running through his head. Who was he kidding? He had less right than anyone to judge Fraser that way. In his day, he'd been to the bars and picked up the guys, and he'd been damn lucky not to catch anything, let's face it. These days it was worse. They might not ever speak again, but Ray didn't want Fraser to die. Panic twisted through his gut. *Stop it*, he told himself. *Enough of this shit.*

There was nothing he could do, and he had to pull his head together before his appointment with Kevin Marsh. He wasn't looking forward to it. A psychiatrist was trained to spot weakness, but Ray wouldn't show him any. He had to keep his temper this time no matter what, keep his feelings over Fraser to himself. This guy as good as held Ray's shield in his hands. From his time as the Bookman Ray had learned that everybody could be manipulated if you had the right angle. Ray just had to figure out what game he needed to play to get around Kevin. He wouldn't let the guy get to him.

When Kevin saw Vecchio's expression, he knew they were in for trouble again. The man's face was drawn and set, his lips pressed into a thin line. Either he hadn't slept all night or something terrible had happened to him, maybe both.

Kevin sat and looked at him silently.

"What?" Vecchio asked explosively.

"I'm waiting for you to start," Kevin replied calmly. He wondered what, if anything, he could do to make Vecchio open up. Sometimes it wasn't even a matter of trust, but of desperation. Having no one else to confide in, the patient finally blurted out the problem.

"Don't wait," Vecchio said darkly. "I don't have anything to say."

"How are you feeling, Ray?"

The answer came immediately. "Great. Just great."

Kevin ran a hand lightly over the ends of his spiked hair. "You don't look great."

"How the hell would you know?" Vecchio didn't meet his eyes.

"I wouldn't. I'm guessing. So why don't you tell me?"

Vecchio crossed his legs and sat back in the chair. "I ain't playing this game." His face looked fiercely defensive, as if he were

in mortal danger if he let anything slip.

"There's no game, Ray. This is your time. You can use it however you want. I'm here if you want to talk." Kevin sat back in his own chair and folded his hands in his lap, waiting. This had happened to him before. Usually the patient couldn't resist saying something, anything to break the silence.

Minutes passed. Vecchio drummed his fingers against the arms of the chair. "Why the hell should I tell you anything?" he said, almost as if to himself.

"It might not be something that you need to tell me. Maybe you need to say something so that you can hear it yourself. Something you know but won't admit."

The color drained out of Vecchio's face. "Like what?" He leaned forward, uncrossing his legs.

Kevin shrugged. "A solution to a problem, maybe. The reason for your anger. Ultimately, you're the only one who knows what you're angry about."

"I guess," Vecchio said to the floor.

They sat again in silence, Kevin willing himself to be still, staring at the back of Vecchio's chair, not quite at his face. Vecchio shifted uncomfortably. Kevin watched as Vecchio went through the silent motions of an inner struggle. Occasionally he stole a glance at Kevin and then looked back at his shoes. He seemed calmer now, but more uncomfortable. Kevin wondered what he was thinking.

The angles of Vecchio's body gradually softened as if the fight was draining out of him, but, judging by body language alone, he was in deep pain. At the end of another long five minutes, Vecchio sat in Kevin's armchair with his elbows resting on his thighs and his head in his hands. He almost looked like a different person now that his anger had been contained. When he finally spoke again, his voice was so soft that Kevin could barely hear it.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," he said softly.

Kevin took a moment to reply. "Maybe

you're ready to get help," he suggested.

Vecchio glanced up at him. "I'm not sure anyone can help me."

"How do you feel?"

Vecchio shook his head and looked back at the floor. "Answer a question with a question," he said. "Just like the shrinks on T.V." He sat up and looked into Kevin's eyes. "I feel like shit. I lost my shield for roughing up a creep. My woman went back to her ex-husband, who, it turns out, has been screwing my former best friend for a year and I didn't even know it." He smiled painfully. "I don't know which is worse. Losing my shield is pretty bad, but finding out that Fraser is a faggot—"

Kevin felt a wave of unaccustomed anger rise in his chest. He had seen some obnoxious patients over the years, but he'd never had the urge to toss one out the door before. *It's the countertransference*, he tried to tell himself. *I'm feeling what he's feeling. He's full of rage and he's passing it on to me.* As a medical resident, Kevin had heard a description of countertransference he never forgot: "It's like you're a big antenna," someone had told him. "Lightning strikes the patient, and it gets transferred to you. It *hurts*. But when you reflect it back to him, you have to remember not to kill him. Remember, you're stronger than he is. You can take it. You're the one who has to be benevolent."

All that flashed through his mind in a second while he watched Ray's eyes widen and his lips part in the realization that he'd gone too far.

"Your friend is a faggot?" Kevin echoed, and he heard the cold anger in his own voice.

"Yeah, but I didn't mean—"

"So am I."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm one, too. A faggot."

"Jesus." Vecchio hung his head. He rose slowly. "I'm sorry. Look, I'll just go. I—"

"Sit down," Kevin said calmly. "You're not getting off that easy." Ray sat and looked at the floor.

Not certain how to keep Vecchio talking, Kevin started thinking out loud. "Every time your friend's name comes up, you seem to have a strong reaction. Maybe we should start by discussing your relationship with him."

Ray looked up at him, startled. "My what?"

"Your relationship with this guy Fraser. Your friendship."

"Oh, that." Vecchio's gaze drifted back to the space between his shoes.

And, in that moment, lightning struck. Kevin felt a shiver run through the air between them, and then he knew. "So," he began, "do most cops talk about gays that way, call them faggots? You guys aren't too P.C., are you?"

"I guess not," Vecchio said, looking up again.

"What about the gay cops?"

Vecchio shrugged. "I don't know any gay cops."

"But there must be some."

"I guess."

"What do they do?"

Vecchio sat back in the chair and folded his arms high against his chest. "They hide, I guess. They don't tell anybody."

"What about you?"

"I'm not—" Vecchio answered too quickly and then stopped.

Kevin met his gaze, noting the fear and the nascent anger. This was going to hurt. "You're not, but you were, weren't you?"

They stared at each other for a long moment. Something like horror bloomed in Vecchio's eyes.

"Oh, god," he sighed as if in surrender. He rubbed his temple, and leaned forward to drop his head in his hands. "I gave it up when I became a cop, but I never stopped having the feelings. I guess..." His voice trailed off and then came back stronger. "I guess I'm bi." He

was holding his head as if it might burst. "I don't know what that has to do with my temper."

"A lot, I think," Kevin said calmly, feeling the high he always felt after bringing on a revelation like that. "If a person is hiding his true nature, he can't cope with things—with normal, everyday things. And the longer he hides it, the worse it gets, the angrier and more resentful he feels. Of course he feels resentful—everyone wants to express themselves, everyone wants to be loved for who they are."

"We were fine when we were friends," Ray said so softly that Kevin had to strain to hear him. "I screwed it all up when I left."

"Why did you leave, Ray? Why did you take that undercover assignment?"

Vecchio sat up slowly like a man coming up from deep underwater. The bright afternoon sun was lighting the blinds with a brilliant glow. Vecchio's eyes were a piercing green and Kevin stared into them, willing the man to bare his soul. "I left because I thought I might do something stupid. I thought I might take his face in my hands or put my arms around him, or shove him against a wall and..." He stopped, shaking his head. "I can't talk about this," he whispered brokenly.

Kevin let the silence stretch itself out around them. After a minute Vecchio went on.

"When I went undercover, I went to a very dangerous place. I was surrounded by hardened criminals, guys who would kill you as soon as look at you. I had to be harder and more violent than all of them put together. I had to be the king asshole. The weird thing was, I had to be the kind of guy my father always wanted me to be. My dad would have been proud of me as the Bookman."

Kevin was glad Vecchio wasn't

looking at him at that moment. The Bookman? Kevin had heard of him. Kevin's dad was a "true crime" buff, and he'd seen a show about the mobsters of Vegas. Wasn't the Bookman supposed to be in prison?

But Kevin left those thoughts aside as Vecchio went on. "And part of me got into it, you know? I rode in limos. I had forty-five gorgeous suits in my closet and fifty pairs of Italian shoes. I ate what I wanted. Nobody told me what to do, nobody crossed me. If I wanted sex, I got the highest class call girl there was—Grade A prime, inspected, disease free. And they fawned all over me. All I had to do to enjoy it was to stay alive."

Kevin shook his head. "That must have been hard."

"Nah. I took to it, I told you. I had a talent for it. The hardest thing was feeling lonely all the time, missing everybody, wondering how my family was, and Fraser..." He stopped.

"And Fraser?" Kevin prompted.

"He was falling hard for his new partner. Doing all the things I knew he'd never do with me. Christ."

Vecchio fell silent again. The minute hand on Kevin's desk clock clicked into place on the 10. "Ray, our time is up, and we're going to have to stop in a minute. Do you want to come back tomorrow? I have some time at 10:00, or at 1:00, if your prefer."

"One is better," Ray said faintly.

"How do you feel right now, Ray?"

"Like an idiot. A fuckup."

"You haven't done anything wrong."

"Just fucked up my life."

"You just admitted something really momentous to yourself, and that's the first step towards fixing things. Do you feel any sense of relief?"

Ray rose and took the appointment card Kevin handed him. He looked dazed and exhausted. "I dunno. Maybe."

"See you tomorrow, Ray."

Vecchio didn't answer as he closed the

door behind him.

Ray slid out the drink holder and jammed his coffee cup into it. The damn thing always was a little lopsided, just like the rest of this car. Jeez, he was getting used to driving this lousy piece of shit, with its dents and loose chrome. At least it ran, unlike some motor pool cars he'd had before.

He glanced at the doorway of the Velvet Glove. It was early, barely 7:00, and the sun just gone down. Pretty soon things would start to pick up. Ray could wait. It was pretty warm, and he had coffee and a sandwich that he didn't even want wrapped in butcher paper sitting on the seat next to him. His car must look like a dozen other wrecks parked on this block, and himself like a dozen other lowlifes. People didn't look at each other too closely in this neighborhood.

It got darker and the lights went on around him. The Velvet Glove sported a neon sign representing a red hand making a fist and opening, over and over, while lavender script spelling "The Velvet Glove" kept scrolling and blinking out. It was mesmerizing if you stared at it too long.

Ray remembered that club from years ago. He was so young then he used to get carded whenever he went in. It had changed hands now, and he figured most of the guys he had known then had died or moved on. None of the connections he'd made then had ever come back to haunt him. Funny that when the danger came, it came from inside himself.

After his session with Kevin, Ray felt wrung out and numb. Everything in his life seemed to be in an uncontrollable spiral down to chaos. He had ruined it, all of it. *If I hadn't left, if I hadn't left...* The words sounded like a drumbeat in his head. It was all the Bookman's fault for dying. And all

Ray's fault for taking the easy way out.

Looking at his watch, Ray wondered when Fraser would come. It would be ironic if he didn't—this would be the first time in a week that he had avoided the club. Ray knew something was going down at the Glove, and he figured it would be soon. The least he could do for Fraser was warn him to stay out of there. He didn't know where Fraser was staying; he wouldn't stoop to ask his sister, and he'd die before he went to the Consulate. This was the only place Ray thought they might be able to have a brief, uncomplicated word without involving anyone else. That was all he was going to do, all he could say to Fraser. Fraser was on his own path to hell, screwing a different guy for every night of the week. How long would it take before he caught something bad? What the hell was he thinking?

Time passed. No one even glanced in Ray's direction. He unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite and rolled it up again. The coffee went cold, and he poured it out into the gutter.

It was close to 9:30 when Ray saw Fraser. He was wearing the same civilian clothes as before, but Ray nearly missed him because he was coming out of the club, not going in. He must have entered early while Ray was down the street buying his sandwich and coffee. Slipping out the door, Ray stood silently in the street waiting for Fraser to draw even with his car. And then he noticed that Fraser wasn't alone. That was why he'd wanted to catch the Mountie going in—so that he wouldn't have to face the object of his affections for the night. The guy was six feet tall, with long blonde hair pulled back into a pony tail. He wore tight, dark pants and a black turtleneck that hugged his form.

Ray ducked down behind the car and let them pass. When they reached the end of the block, he followed silently. They walked another block, and when Ray turned the corner after them, they had disappeared. He hurried forward, looking into the parked cars, which

were all empty. They must have gone down the alley.

Pausing at the edge, he peeked around cautiously. They were there, standing about halfway down near some dumpsters. Fraser had his back to the wall and his companion was moving in for a kiss, talking and caressing Fraser's arms from shoulder to elbow in big, lazy strokes.

It was as if Ray had been transported from the mouth of the alley to Fraser's side. He honestly didn't remember making the decision to put one foot in front of the other, but suddenly he was taking Fraser's pony-tailed friend by the arm and throwing him into the middle of the alley.

"Chicago P.D.!" he yelled as he lunged after the guy. The guy was younger and probably stronger than he was, but Ray was going to beat him up. Fraser grabbed Ray from behind and held him fast by the arms while he struggled. The punk got up and stared at them, wavering.

"It's all right," Fraser called to him. "He's a friend of mine. You can go."

"Some friend!" the blond yelled over his shoulder as he disappeared quickly down the street.

Ray finally wrenched himself out of Fraser's grasp and turned to face him. "You jerk!" he yelled. "You stupid asshole of a Mountie." He took Fraser by the shoulders and shook him, and the Mountie shoved him away.

"You don't want to do this, Ray," Fraser said coaxingly, but Ray had heard enough from that mouth that had probably sucked off six guys in a week, and he faked a move, looking for an opening. He knew that Fraser could beat him up any day, but he couldn't stop himself.

"I'm gonna pound you into the ground. You idiot! How the hell could you have sex with a bunch of guys you picked up at the Glove?" he shouted. "You're gonna die, you moron!"

Fraser looked at him as if he had said something shocking. Ray threw another punch, but Fraser saw it coming and blocked it, shoving Ray back again. "But, Ray, I haven't—" he began, dropping his hands.

Pulling back his fist, Ray saw his opening and sprang for it, knowing in his heart that Fraser would stop him. Everything went slow-motion then, and, to his horror, Ray saw Fraser consider the incoming blow and close his eyes to meet it. Ray tried to take it back, but everything seemed to accelerate as his fist crunched into the side of Fraser's jaw. The Mountie's head snapped back, his feet left the ground, and he crashed into the brick wall. He slid down and sat, putting one hand up to his mangled cheek.

Ray stood looking down at him. His knuckles hurt like hell and remorse filled his chest. He squatted down next to his ex-partner.

"Benny, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Ray," Fraser said, palpating his cheek. "For a moment, I thought you might have broken the zygomatic arch, but now I see that—"

"You're not fine, Fraser. I hit you as hard as I could. I thought you'd stop me. Jesus, I'm sorry." He took Fraser's face between his hands and tried to assess the damage, but he ended up looking into his eyes. "Benny?" Ray said tentatively. "Benny, it's none of my damn business what you do with those guys you meet at the Glove."

Fraser nodded. "I wasn't aware that you had been watching me," he said.

"I saw some photos," Ray said awkwardly. "Surveillance pictures. Something big is going down in that club, and you don't want to be there when it does. Something to do with drugs. I... I wanted to warn you, Fraser."

"Thank you kindly, Ray," Fraser said without his usual conviction.

Ray stood and offered Fraser a hand. "So you won't be going there no more, right?"

"I suppose not." Ignoring the proffered hand, Fraser rose slowly with his back braced

against the wall. The purple was starting to rise in his cheek.

"Damn," Ray said, feeling a twinge of guilt. "You'd better get some ice on that. There's a gas station down the block. Come back to my car. I'll go get a bag."

"That's really not necessary, Ray," Fraser said, brushing off his jeans.

"Come on. While you're putting ice on your face, I can put some on my hand."

"No, thank you, Ray."

Ray met his eyes for a moment and then hung his head. "Look, I'm sorry, Fraser. I just lost it, okay?" He glanced up at Fraser's face. "Why didn't you stop me from hitting you, anyway?"

"I got tired of fighting," Fraser said. "Good-night, Ray."

Ray watched him go down the alley, and then he had to close his eyes against the sight so that he wouldn't run after him.

The phone rang at five and startled Ray out of a sound sleep.

"Detective Vecchio?" It was Welsh. His heart pounding, Ray sat up and opened his eyes on darkness.

"Yes, sir? If you're calling to see if I've been going to that shrink—"

"I know you've been going, detective. That's not what this is about. Something important has come up. I need you in my office right away."

"Now? But I'm suspended." Something about Welsh's tone made Ray hope he wouldn't be for long.

"Now, Vecchio. And expect to see some old friends." Welsh hung up.

Old friends? The inkling of hope was turning to something darker. As Ray showered and dressed, he tried to keep from speculating. The only "old friends" he could think of were his old FBI handlers when he was the Bookman, and he never wanted to see them again. Ray didn't seem

to have friends anymore. He'd alienated everyone at the precinct, and now he'd punched out Fraser. The only friends he had now were enemies. He smiled sardonically at his reflection in the mirror as he straightened his tie. *That's about all I deserve*, he thought.

The Precinct was almost deserted when Ray walked through on his way to see Welsh. This was a slow time of day, when most of the night's activity was winding down, and most of the troublemakers of the night before were either home in bed or in a holding cell. When Ray had done night shift on the beat back at the beginning of his career, he had always breathed a sigh of relief at around this time, deciding that he was fated to live another day.

When he reached Welsh's office, his worst suspicions were confirmed. Carson and Dulles stood there waiting for him, wearing the false smiles that told him right away they wanted something from him. His gun and his badge sat on Welsh's desk. They were setting the trap and baiting it. Whatever it was, they wanted it awful bad. Welsh looked uncomfortable as he offered Ray some coffee. That was not a good sign either.

They shook hands all around and sat down on folding chairs brought in for the occasion.

"How are you, Ray?" asked Carson. He was an African-American man with a smooth complexion and features that would have looked good on a model. Ray had never been able to figure out exactly how old Carson was. He could be thirty-five and he could be fifty, although older was more likely considering the amount of power he wielded at the Bureau. He was smooth and well-spoken and Ray didn't trust him a bit. Dulles, who looked as nondescript as his name implied, was a pale, washed-out white man with bad acne scars. He was Carson's eyes and ears. Ray didn't think he was half as stupid or unaware as he usually seemed to act.

"I been better," Ray said, shrugging. "Why don't you just tell me what you want and get it over with? I got places to be."

"From what we heard lately, the only place you got to be is a psychiatrist's office," Dulles said meanly, and Ray realized that the man's feral look reminded him of a little dog who nipped at the prey's ankles to slow it down so the big dog could come in and finish it.

Ray rose. "You wanna trade insults? Do it after I'm gone, okay? I did a good job for you guys, and I got jack. You didn't even protect me when you could have. I was almost hung out to dry there a couple times, and you would have let it happen."

"But you got out of it yourself, didn't you, Ray?" Carson said soothingly. "We were always watching your back, but we had faith in you. We knew what you could do. That's why we're trusting you with this assignment. Believe me, it's not some petty gambling or arms running deal."

Ray hated himself, but he had to ask. "Oh, yeah? Then what is it?"

"Are you in?" asked the little dog.

"First I gotta hear what kind of shit I'm stepping in. Then I'll tell you if I'm ready to jump in with both feet."

Carson leaned in for effect. "It's top secret. Even if you don't take this you can't breathe a word of it."

The little hairs stood up on the back of Ray's neck. "Maybe I don't even want to know," he said uneasily.

Carson ignored him. "It's tactical nuclear weapons. One, maybe two of them."

There was silence in the room. Ray looked at Welsh, who shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"You're kidding me. Is it true, Lieutenant? Or are they putting me on?"

"That's what they tell me."

Ray could tell that Welsh didn't buy it. "Some creep got hold of actual nuclear

weapons?"

"Suitcase sized," Carson confirmed.

Ray couldn't resist a little jibe. "Hey, how's that for good work down at the Bureau?" Carson flushed but he didn't take the bait. They wanted him much too badly. "Who's the perp?"

"An old pal of yours—Charlie Figaro."

Ray stared. "Charlie stole nuclear weapons? That's not his M.O. He's a low-risk kind of guy."

"He's an arms-dealer, right? I guess he's moving up in the world," Carson said, shrugging.

"Yeah," Ray said skeptically, "up the express elevator. So, where do I fit in?"

"The Bookman wants to help Charlie sell them and move them to the buyer, for a price. But first he has to know where they are..."

At the sound of that name from Carson's lips a jolt of adrenaline coursed through Ray's body. He stood and looked down at them, his hands clenched in fury. "The Bookman? I was told at my debriefing that the Bookman was gonna be declared dead. That was promised to me."

"Well, actually," Carson said, looking uncomfortable, "we finally decided to say he was in Marion, recovering from a bullet wound in isolation, so he could only have a minimum of outside contact. His network has been receiving messages from him through his law firm all year."

"The Bookman's network is intact? You said you were gonna dismantle it. What the hell kind of messages has this ghost been sending? Are you guys at the Bureau doing a little drug-dealing and gun-running on the side? And how the hell can you resurrect that guy again when my cover got blown so bad that every asshole from here to Canada knows I was him?"

Dulles laughed, but, at a look from his partner, stopped suddenly.

"Your cover wasn't really blown so

badly," Carson said earnestly, ignoring his first question. "Muldoon has been in isolation himself, and he doesn't know who you really are. And, besides, he thinks he killed you."

"What about those guys in the hotel room? They were the Bookman's boys and he set them up for Fraser and Kowalski."

Carson made a dismissive gesture. "Langoustini was always doing things like that to his people when things went wrong."

"This is bullshit!" Ray exploded. "You lied to me."

"We'll have every safeguard in place," Carson said. "The usual law firm will send someone to visit you every four days. That way we'll know if anything's going wrong, and you can send coded messages through them."

"Oh, that'll help," Ray said sarcastically. "They'll show up to see me and let you know I died last Thursday. What about friends on the inside?" Unable to contain his anger, he started pacing behind them, between their backs and the door.

Looking discomfited, Carson shook his head. "Chicago Central is too corrupt. We don't have anyone secure in the administration. Not like at Marion."

"Great," Ray said. "Sounds like a great place to spend a vacation. Every safeguard, my ass." He made a turn and paced back the way he'd come.

"Sit down, detective," Welsh put in. "I promised you'd hear out the whole crazy plan. It definitely smells. Of course, the way they tell it, it almost makes sense." As Welsh spoke, Ray reluctantly returned to his chair.

"What do you mean, 'the way we tell it'?" Carson asked dangerously, narrowing his eyes.

"I mean," said Welsh, leaning forward, "that you leave out anything that doesn't fit your story. Just because you

spread rumors that the Bookman was in isolation in Marion for the last year doesn't mean that anyone bought it. The Bookman's machine is still in place—fine, but who knows if they think they've really been getting messages from him? For all you know, they might be waiting for a chance at Vecchio. They might be laughing in their beer mugs over your rumors. What if they have someone inside Marion who knows Langoustini isn't there?"

"Then why haven't they bothered Ray in the last year?"

"Hey, it was even on 'True Crime Stories,'" Dulles added. "They did 15 minutes on the Bookman. They said for sure he's in Marion." Everyone went on as if he hadn't spoken.

"Langoustini's guy in Marion got released a long time ago," Ray said, his mind racing. "You think they really believe he's alive?"

"Once they see you, Ray, they'll believe it." Dulles grinned, and now he looked more like a hyena than a dog.

"Who's gonna see me? Where?"

"You're going to be transferred from Marion back to Chicago to stand trial. And while you're here, you'll meet your old friend Charlie."

"Isn't he in Joliet?" Ray asked sharply.

"He's being transferred to Chicago Central in about two weeks. All you have to do is convince him you're Langoustini and he'll ask you to broker the deal."

Ray snorted. "How do you know? Maybe he already has a broker."

"A right wing extremist group—Liberty's Army—has been sniffing around, but they're afraid of him."

"And they won't be afraid of me because...?"

"Charlie's last deal went up in flames," said Dulles.

Ray looked down and laughed, shaking his head. "How soon we forget. So did mine. I got shot, remember? And the guy I was

brokering for is serving life in Canada."

Carson leaned in toward Ray before he spoke. "Charlie has been asking around. He contacted your law firm to see if you were still in circulation. The Bookman's clean, Ray. Nobody but Muldoon went down because of you—you took the fall for your people. You've still got respect that Charlie lost when he dragged half his guys in after him trying to get a plea bargain."

"This sounds too simple," Ray said warily. "What's the catch? Does Charlie know the FBI's on his tail? That won't make my job any easier."

"Nah, he doesn't know a thing," Dulles said, smiling.

"You've been looking, right, and asking around? Of course he knows you know." Ray was rewarded by seeing Carson and Dulles exchange a brief glance.

"Look, Ray, we'll level with you," Carson said. "He might have heard. We don't know."

Welsh groaned. "This is worse than I thought. Vecchio, I'm sorry I called you in here. This plan is half-baked. There are too many risks. You can do what you want, but as your superior officer I strongly advise you not to take it. These guys don't care what happens to you any more than they did the last time."

Carson smiled and played his ace. "You'll be reinstated at full pay," he said, "maybe even with a raise."

"I'm at the top of my scale," Ray said faintly. He had been staring at the floor since Welsh had spoken. The Bookman was alive. Ray couldn't get it out of his head.

"We can do something about that, can't we, Lieutenant Welsh?"

Welsh made a disdainful face. "If Vecchio here doesn't come back in a body bag, I could always recommend him for a bonus. And, when he's ready, he could earn more by doing some supervision and training, like I want him to do. But he

doesn't have to do your dirty work to get that. He can do that right now."

Dulles glanced at Ray expectantly, but Ray wasn't thinking about risks or money. He was wondering what it would feel like to be that man again, the man who didn't give a fuck what anyone thought, who met violence with violence and always knew exactly what to do. A man who didn't have to worry about relationships because he didn't have any, and whose sexuality was another way of having power over others, when it wasn't just a bodily function. Ray hated himself as the Bookman, but maybe the Bookman was who he really was.

"You want to help your country, don't you, Ray?" Carson asked smoothly. "Save innocent lives? We can take down Charlie and Liberty's Army at the same time. Remember the Oklahoma Federal Building bombing? This could be—"

"Detective, these guys don't give a damn about you," Welsh said, looking at Carson defiantly. "If I were you, I would consider—"

"I'll do it," Ray said quickly, with the feeling he was grasping at a lifeline. "But this time I get a say in the plan."

Because Charlie Figaro wouldn't be transferred to Chicago for about two weeks, Ray had time to get briefed and grow a mustache. That was one thing he insisted on this time. That false mustache had caused more problems than anything. He had always been worrying about it, but he hadn't had any mishaps because he had always controlled his own environment. He didn't have that luxury this time.

Every day when he looked in the mirror he seemed a little more arrogant, a little colder, a bit more like the creep he had played for a year. At times he wondered why he was doing it, but then he remembered that regular life hadn't really worked out for him. He didn't like the Bookman, but he wasn't ready to leave

him behind. Langoustini always seemed to be looking over his shoulder, getting between him and the situations in his life. Ray wasn't sure who he was anymore. If he could pull this off, maybe things would be different.

Fraser nodded with satisfaction. "Well," he said to Dief, "we found it."

Dief whined and gave a little yip.

"Yes, well, I hope he is able to see though the color and value it for what it is."

Yipping again, Dief turned and trotted down the sidewalk.

Fraser ignored him. From the wolf's point of view, they'd just spent almost two weeks walking around unfamiliar neighborhoods on a wild goose chase. But now they'd found the thing Fraser had been looking for—the thing he owed to Ray.

He wondered if Ray would accept it. Well, all he could do was try to make things right. He wondered if he was deluding himself again, if this was just an excuse to see his old friend when he knew quite well that his old friend didn't want to see him. Actually, he wasn't sure anymore how Ray felt about seeing him. The last time they'd seen each other, Ray had sought him out. That Ray had punched him in the face was also true, but it seemed he hadn't meant to. And then there was the way that Ray had looked into his eyes after he had fallen. Fraser could still feel the desperate grip of Ray's fingers on his jaw.

All Fraser could do was try one more time. And if this didn't work, maybe he'd be able to let go.

"I'm going inside the building," he announced distinctly. Dief peeked out from behind a tree down the street. "You can wait for me there." Fraser walked up to the ramshackle office and opened the door.

Kevin smiled as his client walked in. "Hello, Ray."

Vecchio nodded. "Kevin." The lanky man folded himself into the chair, and looked at his surroundings as he usually did before speaking. Kevin took the opportunity to observe him.

Things were different than they had been two weeks ago. There was the mustache, of course, but there were also some more subtle differences. The man moved purposefully now, and there was something alien about his manner and the way he spoke. Even with his temper, he had been what someone might describe as a "nice guy." Not now. Now, he seemed to hold himself above the world. When Vecchio spoke, Kevin wasn't sure to whom he was actually speaking. It was a creepy feeling, almost like the feeling Kevin had had once during his residency when he observed an interview with a multiple personality patient. There was a difference of degree, of course, but not of kind. Vecchio wasn't split, but he was changing into another person—someone who was an aspect of himself.

All that could be chalked up to good preparation and acting skills, of course. Kevin felt unsure of himself here. From what his dad had told him about the show on "True Crime Stories," he figured that most people who got near the Bookman felt uneasy, if not thoroughly afraid. But what worried him was that Vecchio seemed to be shutting down certain aspects of himself that made him who he was. There was a narrowing effect that Kevin could feel through Vecchio's responses, and he didn't know what, if anything, to do about it.

"I leave tonight, you know," Vecchio said finally. "I might miss a few appointments." He smiled in that new cool way that didn't transmit any empathy at all.

"How do you feel about that?" Kevin had to stop himself from cringing when Vecchio snorted with laughter. Why had he fallen back on such a platitude?

"I feel okay," Vecchio said. "I just want to get going on this assignment. It ain't gonna be so easy to pull off, you know? Too bad I can't tell you much about it."

"You haven't told me anything about it," Kevin retorted, irritated. "All we really have to talk about are your feelings about playing this character again."

Vecchio shrugged. "And, you see, I feel okay about it, so there ain't much to say."

"Then let's go back to Fraser and how you felt about your meeting with him." Kevin had the satisfaction of seeing Vecchio's smug smile fade away.

"We went over that last time," he said sullenly.

"It's worth another look," Kevin said. "It was a pretty intense encounter. You hit him."

"Punched him right in the face. He didn't even try to stop me." Vecchio looked like he was trying to strike a casual air, but he just sounded morose.

"And...?" Kevin prodded.

"And how did that make me feel?" Vecchio asked sardonically. "Lousy, okay? We used to be friends. He was the best friend I ever had. I asked if I could help him, get him some ice, but I guess he was mad. He just walked away from me. I told you this."

"You didn't tell me anything else." Kevin picked up a pen off his desk and balanced it on his two forefingers.

"Nothing else happened." Vecchio was staring at the Dali poster as if he'd never seen it before.

"You had feelings." Kevin put down the pen and leaned forward a little.

"Did I?" Vecchio asked vaguely. His eyes were out of focus now and his mind was far away.

"What did he say after you hit him?"

"He said, 'I'm tired of fighting.'"

"Had you ever fought with him

before?"

"All the time. Not physically. We used to argue for hours sometimes."

"That sounds like an interesting friendship."

"Yeah." Vecchio smiled and for a moment Kevin saw the man he had taken to when they first met two weeks ago.

"So tell me about him."

Vecchio sighed. "Okay. He's Canadian. I guess you got that. He's had some pain in his life, but he never talks about it. He always does what he thinks is right, and he never asks for anything for himself, but somehow he gets it, you know what I mean?"

"He's manipulative? Passive-aggressive?"

Vecchio looked blank. "When he wants something, when he thinks something should be a certain way, it's like he can't rest until it is. Nobody can rest. It's hard to... to disappoint him." Vecchio was leaning forward with his hands folded in front of him, looking hard at that patch of rug between his shoes. When he looked up, his face was full of anguish. "I fucked things up, you know? I left so that nothing would happen to Fraser—so that I wouldn't happen to Fraser—and look what happened to him instead. He went off with one guy, and now he's screwing a different guy every night. He's making himself sick, and I wonder if...it could be over me."

Carefully, Kevin relaxed both hands on the desktop. He couldn't overreact to this. "How do you know, Ray?"

"Surveillance pictures of some gay bar. He's always there, and always with someone different." He paused. "I didn't tell you this, but the night I hit him, I saw him coming out of there with some guy. That's why I lost it so bad."

Kevin ignored the second revelation for the moment. "That sounds like some pretty serious self-destruction. Has he ever done anything like this before?"

"Well, you know, he was always

jumping off things, tasting weird shit, taking risks, falling off roofs... He's getting older, though, just like me, and my sister told me he hurt his back a couple of times while I was gone." He sat back suddenly and fixed Kevin in his gaze. "I used to think of Fraser as indestructible. It was almost as if he couldn't die. Well, until I shot him—accidentally—and then he almost did. I worried about him after that. And now..."

"You shot him?" Kevin was startled.

"He got between me and a perp. They were moving, it was... I thought she had a gun." He looked suddenly defensive. "I've taken two for him, you know. I saved his ass twice, and the second time he left me lying there in the hospital and went off to Canada with his boyfriend."

Kevin tried to focus. This interview was all over the map. Vecchio's mood swings were getting a little disturbing. "When you were there with him in the alley, what did you feel? What did you think it meant when he said he was tired of fighting?"

Vecchio shook his head. "I dunno. I guess it meant more than it meant—about me punching him, I mean. I guess it meant that he was tired of the struggle. Of me and my bullshit." He stayed silent so long, staring at the blinds, that Kevin didn't think he'd speak again. When his voice came, it was so soft he had to start over. "After I hit him, he went down, and I went over to him, and I took his face in my hands, and..."

"Yes?"

"And I wanted to kiss him so bad."

"Why didn't you?" Kevin asked. They were finally getting somewhere.

But Vecchio put on the brakes. "I can't talk about this," he whispered. "It's gonna knock me down. I have to be strong or they're gonna eat me up in there."

"In where?"

Vecchio shuddered visibly. "Prison."

"You're going undercover in

prison." Kevin made it a simple statement, but privately he was horrified. Vecchio would be at the mercy of others, trapped between the guards and the prisoners.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Are you sure this is a wise decision?"

Kevin asked cautiously.

Vecchio rolled his eyes. "The decision is made. All I have to do is go."

"You still have a choice."

"I suppose I do. I'm going." Vecchio's temper was stirring, making his voice rise and his eyes flash.

"It sounds to me as if you want to punish yourself. Doesn't this plan feel a little self-destructive?" For Kevin, the fact that Vecchio was going to prison had raised a red flag. It was the sort of assignment someone might not come home from alive.

Vecchio shook his head and laughed, but his jaw was set, his eyes angry. "What the hell are you talking about?" he said harshly. "Police work is dangerous. Some guys can hack it and some can't. I happen to be one who can."

Kevin eased off. "When will you be back?"

"I don't know if I will be back." Vecchio had jammed both hands in his jacket pockets, and Kevin had the idea that they were balled into fists.

"I hope you will," Kevin said sincerely. He couldn't take his point any further right now; this was the wrong time to undermine Vecchio's confidence.

Ray's angry mouth twitched into a crooked smile. "Me too."

The appointment was over, but Kevin didn't know how the hell to sum up the rollercoaster ride they'd just been through, so he didn't try. "Godspeed, Ray," he said gently. "Keep yourself safe in there."

"I'll try," Vecchio said, rising. In three strides he was gone, and Kevin felt as if a very cold wind had just blown through the door.

It was dinnertime but Ray wasn't hungry. That had been happening a lot lately. He was restless and unhappy after his appointment with Kevin, and he didn't have anything in the house anyway, since he was getting ready to leave. There were a few microwave diet dinners in the freezer, but they were from Stella's time. Ray never ate that kind of crap. He ought to eat now when he could, because the slop in prison was going to turn his stomach for sure. Thinking about ordering a pizza just for a distraction, he was startled when the buzzer rang.

He picked up the receiver. "Who's there?" he asked cautiously. He had told his family it was a conference he was going to so they would stay away. They were going to be royally pissed if they found out otherwise.

"It's Benton Fraser, to see Detective Vecchio. May I come up?"

God. It had been two years and they were playing Super-Mountie versus Detective Armani again. What the hell did Fraser want, and why now? There was only one way to find out.

"Yeah, Fraser, come on up." Ray pushed the button to let him in. If they could talk civilly to each other, maybe they could put that punch in the jaw to rest. Ray just wouldn't let himself think about the rest of it.

When Ray opened the door, Diefenbaker bounded in, nearly knocking him over in his enthusiasm. "Hey, boy," Ray said, laughing, "so you like me even when I ain't got nothing to eat?"

Fraser stood there outside the door like a vampire waiting to be invited in. "Come in, already, Fraser." The Mountie reached down and lifted a large rucksack and sleeping bag. "Where are you off to?" Ray asked, suddenly wondering if this was good-bye.

"I... I'm not sure. We were staying at

the Consulate, but I—or rather Diefenbaker—wore out our welcome. I am on indefinite leave, after all."

"You are?"

Fraser nodded. "I don't know when I'll be going back. When they call me, I suppose. It will probably be at least another month."

Ray finally coaxed him in and shut the door. "What did you do?"

"Oh, I used unorthodox methods, took risks. The usual sort of thing."

Ray smiled at him and shook his head. "See, even there you're weird. It's not just a Mountie thing." Fraser was standing there looking stiff as a board. At least he was talking. His left cheekbone was still purple, and he had a slight black eye. "Sit down," Ray said, wanting to see him bend.

"Oh, I can't stay," Fraser said quickly. "I just wanted to show you something."

"Well, sit down and show me."

"Uh, it isn't here. You have to come with me."

Ray was willing to do almost anything rather than stay in his empty apartment. His keepers had told him not to go anywhere, but fuck that shit. "All right. I'll get my jacket."

"We'll have to drive. Well, actually, we could walk, but it might take most of the evening."

"How far is it?"

"Nine miles."

"Yeah, Fraser, good call. We're driving." Ray got his jacket and keys and stuffed his wallet in his pocket.

They rode down the elevator to the garage in silence and got into the car. There was no room for Fraser's hat on the dash, so he held it awkwardly between his knees. Dief's hot breath puffed against Ray's shoulder and neck like it always had. They sat silently for a moment and then Ray started the car. "Okay, where to?"

Fraser directed him to the outskirts of the city, on the South Side. They started passing crummy strip malls and used car lots.

Ray couldn't imagine what Fraser needed to show him here.

"Are we close?" he asked.

"Approximately two more miles."

"All right." Ray sighed.

"You grew a mustache."

"Yeah."

"It's like that mustache you had the last time I saw you, but it's real, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Ray repeated. "I have some undercover work to do. I gotta be that guy again starting tonight."

"The Bookman." Fraser said it flatly.

"That's the one."

"Why—"

"I can't tell you, Fraser. I already said too much."

"Understood. Turn right." Ray turned without slowing much and made the car skid a little. Fraser braced his arms against the dash. "I don't suppose it would do any good to tell you that you've been violating the posted speed limit for the last five miles?"

"Probably not," Ray said, smiling.

"Here we are."

Ray stopped in front of a used car dealership. "Here?"

Fraser got out and Ray followed. "Look," he said, pointing straight ahead.

Ray looked, but he didn't see anything at first, then a shape under the lights started to look familiar. "Christ," he muttered. "It's a Riv."

It was a 1971 Buick Riviera, but it had been to places most Rivs hadn't. Someone had painted it pink and orange, and it was flat house paint, Ray could see when he got closer. There were flower-power decals stuck on the doors.

"Oh, my god," Ray said. "Somebody ought to be shot for doing this. But, hey, you know, the interior's not all that bad." As he popped the hood, he glanced over at Fraser, who was looking at him anxiously. "You found me a Riv, Benny," he said.

"Thank you. I'm touched."

"I wanted to buy it for you," Fraser said, "but I didn't have enough money, and they wouldn't barter."

"Huh, imagine that. A used car lot that wouldn't barter." He grinned broadly at Fraser. "Maybe if you had some seal pelts, that might've worked, huh?"

"Ray, I doubt they're interested in seal pelts. I tried to barter my labor, but I didn't seem to have any skills they valued."

Ray stared. "Jeez, Benny. You tried to work to get me a car? You didn't have to—"

"Can I help you gentlemen?" asked a short, stocky little man wearing a beige polyester suit. "This is a fine automobile. A classic, gentlemen, a classic."

"Yeah, until it got painted like a whore's living room," Ray said, opening the hood.

There followed a very satisfying discussion about engine wear and suspensions that ended with Ray taking the thing for a drive. The little man sat in the back with Diefenbaker, whom he hadn't wanted to bring at all. Finally, his desire to get rid of this clunker had outweighed his fear for the thirty-year-old seats.

"So the engine'll need rebuilding soon, and the shocks are shot. And, shit, it'll never pass a smog inspection unless I rebuild the carburetor. This isn't the original steering wheel," Ray added darkly. "Do you have it?"

"No, sir," the salesman said. "I'm sure you can get one at a junkyard."

"A junkyard," Ray muttered. "Hey, it's missing the cigarette lighter. You see, Fraser?"

"But you have one."

"Yeah, I kept it." Visions of his first Riv made Ray shake his head. "It'll be a lot of work," he said.

"It's a bargain at \$2500," the little man ventured.

"Are you insane? I'll give you \$200." Ray's driving was getting more erratic as his blood heated up.

"Can we head back to the lot now?" the

man said timidly. "I'll let it go for \$1000."

"Four-hundred dollars. That's it. That's my offer."

"Five," the salesman said weakly as they skidded and bounced up the driveway.

"Whatever. Damn, these tires are almost bald," Ray said.

They went in the office and signed the papers in a few minutes. Ray paid with his credit card and took the pink slip. The dealer promised to drive it over to the Vecchio house if Ray included cab fare. Fraser would smooth the way with Ma and Frannie. Ray didn't want to know what his family would think of having it sit in the driveway until he got back.

They climbed back in the motor pool car to go home. Ray looked over at Fraser, who was watching him with interest.

"Benny, you never cease to amaze me. Here I was thinking that you were really pissed off at me, and you go and get me a car."

"Strictly speaking, I didn't get it, Ray. I just found it."

Ray shook his head. "How long did it take you, huh? I bet you've been looking for three weeks."

Fraser smiled a little. "Two."

Ray laid a hand on his arm. "Well, thank, you, Benny. This gives me something to come home to."

Fraser looked concerned. "Ray, are you exaggerating, or will you be in danger?"

"Huh. I never exaggerate, Benny. Especially not this time. Mucho danger out there, for sure." Ray couldn't tell Fraser how worried he was, because then he'd start to feel it—all of it, not just the surface. He couldn't handle the waiting and the fear together. Once he started out, once he really became Armando Langoustini, he could focus on his job and put the feelings aside.

His handlers were going to pick him up at 3:30 a.m. Until then he needed a distraction.

"Hey, Benny, you hungry?"

"Yes."

"How about a pizza?"

Fraser looked at his hat. "I don't have any money."

"You don't need money. I'm treating you to a pizza. We're celebrating the Riv."

Fraser nodded acceptance at him and looked back at his hat.

They took their pizza out and drove back to Ray's place. He dug a couple of beers out of the fridge, where they had lain for at least six months. To Ray's surprise, Fraser accepted one and drank it out of the bottle. They sat in the living room to eat.

"You're pretty quiet tonight, Benny."

Fraser put his empty plate back on the coffee table with a little clink. "It's just good to see you, Ray."

"It's good to see you, Benny. I'm sorry I was so mad at you. I was just worried that you were hurting yourself, but it's your life. I'll try not to judge you." It hurt to say that, but it felt good, too, to let go of the jealousy—he might as well admit it had been jealousy—and helpless anger at watching Fraser do something so stupid. Well, the anger was still there, but Ray would just try to swallow it.

"You hit me."

"Yeah, I swung the punch, but you could have stopped it from connecting. Why didn't you, Benny?"

"You thought I... had intimate relations with all those men. It shocked me. I suppose I just gave up. If that's what you thought of me, well, then, you really needed to hit me."

Ray returned his half-eaten slice of pizza to his plate and pushed it away. "You mean you didn't... You mean there's another explanation?"

Fraser was looking at him full on, and Ray tried not to get drawn into that gaze. "I

was lonely. I went to the Velvet Glove to try to find a friend I might have something in common with, but all I found were men who wanted to spend the night with me."

"And you kept going back, night after night? I mean, Fraser, that's what the Velvet Glove is all about. That's the whole idea of it. Jesus." When the relief washed through him, Ray realized how much he had cared. If the assignment he was about to embark on hadn't weighed him down so heavily, everything might have felt almost all right again. "Wow. Those guys must have thought they hit the mother lode. You didn't sleep with *any* of them, and they didn't try to kill you?"

"I was just lonely. I came back to Chicago after..." He trailed off.

"You broke up with Stanley." Fraser looked startled. "Stella told me. I guess he called her and asked her to save him when he got to Toronto."

"That's good news. That he reached Toronto, I mean. He walked out when I said...certain things, and I wasn't sure if he was all right."

"Jesus, Fraser. I can't imagine you and Kowalski... You and I knew each other for two years, and then we were apart for two, and now I don't feel like I know you at all. So, tell me, what are you doing, Benny? Why are you here?"

"Ray left, and then I got suspended and I just came back. I didn't think about it much," Fraser said painfully.

"That's not like you." Ray wasn't sure what else to say. "You know, I got suspended, too. I kept blowing my stack, roughing up perps. I'm reinstated now, I guess, so I can do this assignment. They made me go to a shrink."

Fraser nodded. "They recommended that I go, too. I decided to see if I could solve my own problems."

Ray glanced at him quickly. "By coming back here?"

"It would seem so."

"The shrink ain't so bad," Ray said. Fraser was holding something back. Ray could see it, but he couldn't see how to get it out of him. Maybe it was the gay thing. Ray wasn't good at talking about things like that, and Fraser was even worse. Maybe now that they had some sort of understanding, they could be friends like before and let all of that go unsaid, just like they'd swept most of the residue from the Victoria mess under the rug. But Ray must have changed, because now he couldn't be satisfied with that. He had to try to get something out on the table. He wasn't even sure exactly what it was, but maybe he'd find out as he was saying it.

"You know, Benny, I've been thinking about a lot of stuff." Ray knew he was pushing things, but there were so many things he wanted to tell Fraser, so many explanations to make—and to hear—and he had so little time.

"Have you, Ray?"

"I took that bullet, and I talked to you in the hospital and I was fine, right? But then—you know, pigheaded me—I got up out of my bed and went to the precinct, and then I collapsed because I got an infection, and they rushed me back to the hospital and they decided to operate. So they doped me up on painkillers and stuff, and then you called to tell me you were going away."

"I'm sorry, Ray. I did notice that you sounded a little drugged. You talked about coughing up the bullet. I didn't think that could be right."

Ray chuckled. "Didn't I also tell you that I was going to Florida to open up a bowling alley with Stella? I told everybody that, even Stella. Imagine her surprise."

Fraser smiled. "I didn't believe that part."

Ray stared at him. "You thought I married Stella, though, didn't you?"

Fraser actually blushed. "I believed it for a while, yes, until Ray—uh, Stanley—told me it didn't happen." He paused and rubbed a

hand over his forehead. "Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"Detective Kowalski was a good partner."

Ray nodded, looking down until he could control his reaction. He shouldn't expect Fraser to badmouth the man just to make Ray feel good. "Yeah, I heard he was a good guy," he said, meeting Fraser's eyes. "Of course, I didn't see much of that. He wanted to slug me." He laughed. "I wanted to slug him, too. But I get it. I left and you got a new partner. Not your fault. I just always thought we'd...that we'd work together again," he finished lamely. "I don't know. It just all happened so fast."

"You seemed so self-sufficient," Fraser said hesitantly. "Ray—Kowalski—had come to depend on me. Without me, I don't know what would have become of him."

Ray was sitting slouched back on the couch. He took a swig of his beer. "That's what you don't understand, Benny. That wasn't me you saw."

"I beg your pardon?" Fraser said, confused.

"That self-sufficient guy. When I saw you in the hotel room I was still Armando Langoustini. In the hospital—Armando. When I said good-bye to you on the phone—still the Bookman. And even when I went under the knife I was still him. But when I woke up I was Ray Vecchio again. Just the guy you used to know. The clueless guy, you know?" Leaning forward, he put his bottle on the table and rested his elbows on his knees. "When I came out of surgery I asked for you, figuring you'd be right there. I only remembered later what you said about going off on your adventure."

Fraser looked thoughtful. "What do you mean when you say that you 'were' the Bookman?"

"It's hard to explain." Ray made a

searching gesture with one hand. "I got into the role so deep. I had to. To make it work, I had to become someone else."

"I believe I understand," Fraser said slowly. "It was hard for you to come back to yourself."

"Have you ever had that experience? You've done a little undercover."

Fraser shook his head. "I think it has always been hard for me to leave myself. You tried to teach me, but I've never been able to do it."

"You made a pretty fine Ms. Fraser," Ray chuckled.

"Oh, that was still me," Fraser said seriously. "Ms. Fraser was just me wearing a dress."

"And pantyhose," Ray added, toying with his beer. They smiled at each other for a moment, but then the smiles faded and they both looked away. The empty pizza box seemed to yawn at him from the table, and Ray swiveled the cover closed with one hand.

"Things aren't right yet, are they, Ray?" Fraser said quietly. "Between you and me."

"No," Ray said without looking at him.

"Why don't you just say what you have to say?" Fraser said. Ray looked at him. His face always looked so innocent and strong. He was so brave, but it was child's play to hurt him.

"Look, Fraser, why don't we just let it be? I'm leaving tonight, and at least we got to this point, right?"

"I want to hear it," Fraser said stubbornly.

Ray felt a flash of anger. What the hell was he doing, sitting around drinking beer with Fraser? He'd been preparing for his role all week, and now he was soft, off-balance, out of character. "You wanna hear it, Benny? Okay. You were supposed to be there when I got back. You were supposed to wait for me."

"You never asked me to, Ray."

"I sent you that postcard. It meant I was coming back."

Shaking his head, Fraser turned to face him. "I thought it meant that you were all right wherever you were and that I could move on. When you came back and you seemed all right, I just assumed—"

"I had nothing else to think about all that time. Just staying alive and you." Ray got up and walked around to the other side of the coffee table. He was on edge or he wouldn't have said something that revealing.

"I was lonely, Ray. Detective Kowalski needed me." Fraser's eyes pleaded with him to understand, but Ray ignored their appeal.

"Oh, that's rich," Ray said viciously, pacing up and down. "That bastard Kowalski stole my life. He was here with you and my job and my family while I was in hell. I was in hell, and I was the chief devil."

Fraser rose too. "It was a mistake," he said.

"What was? I swear, Fraser—"

"Going away with him."

Ray stopped and looked him in the eyes. Fraser looked shocked at the thing he himself had just said. "Why?"

Fraser looked away. "I... I can't say. I should go. I have to get to the park so I can set up a campsite while the moon is still up."

"You are still the most irritating man alive!" Ray said roughly. "You can't tell me why it was a mistake, and now you're gonna run off and go camp in the park? Goddamn it." He made a violent gesture with his fist. "Oh, shit. I have to leave in a couple of hours." He had been stupid to think he and Fraser could work it out. There were too many hurts, too many things left unsaid for too long. A wave of despair swept over him. He was going off on undercover, maybe to his death, leaving all this anger and raw hurt between him and the best friend he'd ever had.

"I'd better go," Fraser said stiffly. He

took a step towards the door, but Ray blocked his path. He just couldn't let Fraser go yet.

"Don't," Ray said as Fraser looked at him steadily. "Don't go."

"Why not? You have to get ready, and I—"

"It helps, having you here," Ray admitted grudgingly. "Maybe we just better not talk so much for a while." He laid a hand on Fraser's shoulder and squeezed. "You're still my best friend." Ray realized it was true. He had been back a year and he'd met a lot of people but he hadn't made even one friend, let alone one he really cared about.

"I am?" Fraser seemed to relax, his muscles no longer straining towards the door.

"Yeah." With the relief, a sudden thought struck him. "Listen, Fraser, I'll be away for a while—it could be weeks. Why don't you stay here?"

"No, thank you, Ray, I couldn't impose." The Mountie mask was back in place, all smooth politeness.

"It wouldn't be an imposition. I was supposed to get someone to watch the place, go in and out, make a little noise so my neighbors think I'm still here. I never got around to it. You'd be helping me. You'd sort of be my backup."

"All right, Ray, in that case..."

"You can sleep in my bed. There are clean sheets in the closet, and I'll give you all the keys. I'll leave some money for food, 'cause there's nothing to eat here. The only thing is, you can't use the motor pool car except for emergencies, but you could always drive the Riv."

"Thank you kindly, Ray."

"No trouble at all," Ray said. In fact, it felt something like peace.

For the next few hours they puttered around the apartment, cleaning up from dinner, discussing details about the garage opener and the code to get in the front door.

They talked a bit about old times, but mostly they were just quietly together. It felt good to Ray, like a last reprieve before his ordeal. Sure, there were things unsettled between them, but maybe those things were better left unspoken.

After midnight, feeling that they had all the time in the world, they walked to the 24-hour corner store to get some food for Fraser and Dief's breakfast. When they got back, it was suddenly almost 3:00.

"I have to get dressed," Ray said. When he came out of the bedroom he was wearing a faded pair of orange jail coveralls and slip-on shoes. He was even wearing prison underwear and socks. He placed the contents of his pockets on the table. "Here you go, Fraser. My life. It's all yours." He felt naked without his wallet and his badge, even his keys. "Listen, after a few days, would you go see the family? I didn't tell them where I went, and you probably shouldn't. The less they know, the safer they are."

"Yes, Ray," Fraser said looking at him searchingly.

Ray wondered what he was thinking. "What is it, Fraser? You're looking at me funny."

"I don't like to see you dressed like that," he said painfully. "It reminds me of the time we were both in prison."

"Oh, yeah. I was in for contempt, and you—what was it? You stole a candy bar?"

"Milk Duds," said Fraser seriously.

Ray chuckled. "Fraser, you're such a—"

"I have to tell you something, Ray."

"What?"

Fraser looked like a schoolboy wringing his hands over a poorly done assignment. "I have to tell you now. You'll be in danger, and I don't know if I'll see you again."

Ray didn't want to be reminded, but

he really couldn't argue with that. "It's okay, Fraser. Just tell me." He expected Fraser to thank him for the apartment, or something like that. Fraser always took trivial favors so hard. The risking-your-life kind of favor—that, he took for granted.

Fraser looked down, his face twisted with humiliation, and Ray realized it was something more. Fraser took a breath. "I have to answer your question, Ray."

"What question?"

"You asked me why it was a mistake to go away with Detective Kowalski. Just before Ray left, I told him... I said the thing that made him leave. I told him..." Fraser was turning beet red with embarrassment.

Ray folded his arms. "Come on, Benny," he said uncomfortably. "You guys had a spat, but you'll see him again. You'll work it out. You don't have to tell me."

Fraser shook his head miserably and plunged in. "I told him that I wouldn't go to bed with him any more because I should have been with you. I said it was you I wanted, and that I used to think about you all the time, but I knew you'd never... You wouldn't..."

The telephone rang.

Ray stepped back and grabbed it without taking his eyes off Fraser. "Vecchio."

It was Carson, down in the parking garage. "We're here," he said. "Are you ready?"

"Give me ten minutes."

"No can do. Come down now, Vecchio. We have a schedule."

"I need ten fucking minutes," Ray said distinctly. "If you come up here after me I swear I'll call the whole thing off." He hung up and walked back to Fraser.

Fraser's face looked utterly defenseless. His whole soul was spread out there for Ray to trample on, if he so chose. If Ray let this chance go, he'd regret it for the rest of his life. But he knew he had to do it. Tonight—right now—he had to shrink down and cram himself into the mind of a man who held no value but his own

dominance. Benny would make him weak.

He put his hands on Fraser's shoulders. "Benny," he began, wondering how he could say what he had to say. "I just—" But Fraser had leaned forward to plant an awkward kiss on Ray's lips. Its warmth lingered there as Ray turned his face away. "Benny, don't. I'm sorry."

Fraser's eyes were dilated and his mouth hung slightly open. His breath came fast and shallow. Ray couldn't look him in the eyes.

The telephone rang again.

Ray's hands tightened convulsively on Fraser's shoulders.

"I'll be back in a couple of weeks," he whispered. "Promise me you'll be here."

"I promise, Ray." Fraser's voice was almost inaudible.

Consumed with regret, Ray turned and walked out the door. Just like Victoria, he had broken Benny's heart.

As he came out of the elevator into the parking garage he saw an unmarked van with mirrored windows sitting next to a dark blue rental car.

Carson jumped out of the car and ran up to him. "I swear, if you fuck this up, I'll—"

"Stow it," Ray said, walking past him.

The driver got out of the van and Ray recognized him. It was Jerry MacPete, a guy he'd known at the Academy, and definitely not the brightest bulb in the pack. It made some kind of sense that he'd end up at the Bureau. Formerly an unbeatable athlete, he now looked pale and had a paunch hanging over his belt.

"Hey, Ray," Mack said cheerfully. "When I heard it was you, I volunteered for the job. I'm your driver. You can sit in the back seat for the first hour or so, until we meet the van from Marion. Did you know

the press was there today, trying to get a glimpse of the Bookman?"

Ray held up a hand to stop him. "I'll sit in the far back. I'm your prisoner, remember?"

Mack laughed. "Yeah, but you might as well be comfortable until we get to—"

Ray needed desperately to focus, to pull the shell of the Bookman back around himself and forget the taste of Fraser that was still on his lips. He didn't need this self-important guy who wanted to rub shoulders with the main attraction.

"No," he said forcefully. "No privileges. No frills. Cuff my hands behind my back and treat me like the lowlife I am."

"Come on, Ray. I can't—"

"Do it, Mack. I don't want anybody but you to know that I ain't who I'm supposed to be. My life depends on how real this looks. Anybody doesn't buy it, and they open their mouth, and I'm dead meat. Starting now, I am the Bookman, dammit, and if you give me an inch, I'll take it. I'll kill you, you stupid bastard."

"Do it, Mack," Carson said. "He knows what he's doing."

Without another word, Mack shoved Vecchio against the car and cuffed him. He did it roughly, too. "You satisfied, you mook?" he grumbled, and put his hands at Ray's shoulder and waist to guide him up into the van.

Sitting on a hard bench with his hands cuffed behind him, Ray started to feel like the man he was supposed to be. His arms hurt, and his soul hurt, and he figured he wouldn't have a friend in the world when this was over. But maybe he'd survive.

They rode for about an hour, and Ray went in and out of a doze when he could get into a position where the pain of the cuffs was bearable. He'd have marks on his wrists, and that's what he was after. If the Bookman was being moved, he'd have marks, and he'd have bruises. There would be someone among all

those guards and cops who wouldn't mind giving him a kick or two for some old grievance. And then there were the prisoners who had run across the Bookman at one time or another. Ray thought about some of the guys he was going to meet inside. Some he'd seen in Vegas, but others had known the real Bookman when he used to be a big man in Chicago years ago. He hoped Carson's information was correct about who was who. He'd hate to screw up that way.

One thing he could depend upon: they all hated him. He just hoped he still inspired enough fear to keep him alive.

He felt the van leave the interstate and go slowly for a short distance before pulling up a ramp. It stopped. Maybe they were about to transfer him to the other van that had supposedly transported him from Marion.

The doors swung open and he squinted against the light. They seemed to be in an open field behind a large building that blocked the view from the highway. Mack stuck his head in. "Hey, Ray, you want to see your double?" He seemed excited and cheerful again. Maybe he had a short memory. Ray was about to help him with that. "Come on out."

Ray got up unsteadily and jumped down off the van. There was a guy who might have looked like him from a distance getting out of the other vehicle. He gave Ray a respectful nod and stripped off his prison clothes to reveal shorts and a t-shirt underneath.

"Okay, Vecchio, Carson says we have to shackle you," Mack was saying eagerly.

"My name's Langoustini," Ray said tiredly. "And you're a moron."

Mack had him sit on the back of the van to put the shackles on his ankles. Ray let him do it. The chain between them was so heavy he'd have to shuffle rather than

walk. Next, Mack should have attached the chain around his waist to secure the manacles, but instead, he unfastened Ray's handcuffs. Ray had him by the throat in a second.

"What did I tell you?" he said, squeezing hard enough to scare the guy, forcing him to his knees. "Give me the key, and don't make a sound or I'll kill you."

Mack made a gurgling noise. The panic in his eyes was hard to look at, but Ray looked as he squeezed, smiling all the time. Just when Ray thought that he'd have to let go, Mack remembered that he was stronger than Ray and he lashed out, catching Ray full in the mouth. With the shackles on Ray couldn't keep his balance, so he slammed into the side of the van. Carson was there in a second.

"What the fuck are you doing, Mack?" he asked furiously.

Ray laughed. He felt the blood in his teeth and spat some in their general direction. "Thanks for helping me out with that, Mack," he said mockingly. "You've been a real prince."

Mack was looking at him wide-eyed. "He's crazy, Carson. You picked a nut for this assignment. He's gonna—"

"Shut up and help me shackle him," Carson ordered grimly. "He's doing his job—can you do yours? So help me, if you tell one person about this, I will have you fired. I didn't know you knew him, you idiot. Nobody's supposed to know his real name."

They laid Ray out on the ground to bind him. Not only were his feet chained together, but his hands were attached in front of him to the chain around his waist, which was also secured front and back to chains attached to some sort of flexible collar around his neck. When they were done, Carson walked away for a moment, leaving Mack to help Ray to his feet. Mack looked around furtively and kicked Ray hard in the side. "You bastard," he whispered. "I hope they throw the book at you."

So Mack was finally with the program. If Ray's side hadn't hurt so much, he would have laughed. It was starting, his reassimilation

into the Bookman. Even cuffed and lying helpless with his cheek against the earth, for a moment he felt powerful, immune to pain. The moment passed and with it the feeling of invulnerability. His body felt drained.

When Carson returned, they hauled Ray into the back of the van and closed the doors, leaving him in darkness with the taste of blood.

By the time they reached the Central Prison of Chicago, Ray was exhausted in body and mind. When he stood to leave the van, the chains weighed him down so much that he nearly fell. Five or six prison guards gathered around, but no one was approaching too close.

Mack pushed him forward. When he stumbled, his tormentor pulled him up short by his chain. Ray choked when it jerked against his throat. In a few short hours, Mack had gone from hero worship to wanting to kill him.

"Here he is," Mack said, proffering the paperwork. "Watch it. He tried to attack me and I had to knock him down."

Mack released Ray's manacled hands, one at a time, to attach them behind him. At least the guy learned from his mistakes. In case anyone was looking, Ray smiled to himself, a sardonic smile that gave Mack's story the lie.

One guard nudged another. "Looks just like him, doesn't it? I swear to god, I thought he was dead." It was starting already. Ray had a lot of damage control to do.

Now four of the guards came up to flank him. They were all armed, carrying nightsticks. Ray had to laugh. He was weighed down so heavily with chains he could hardly walk, let alone attack someone. Who the hell did they think he was, Hannibal Lector?

The procession began—and it was a procession—a forced march of humiliation that would parade Langoustini in chains in front of a whole, long, three-story bank of cells. This was meant to temper the response to the Bookman's reputation, but as far as Ray could see, it actually had the opposite effect. He heard some jeers and catcalls, but he saw a lot of faces open-mouthed in awe.

He walked as fast as he could without stumbling, holding up his head. If it killed him, he was not looking defeated. He needed to look like he was still a player. Jail wasn't kind to losers.

"Hey, that's not Langoustini," came a voice from one of the cells. "That's some cop. I heard they had a cop playing him in Vegas. That's why a bunch of his guys went down."

For the first time, Ray turned his head and fixed his gaze on an individual. He stopped walking, and the guards tugged on his arms to urge him forward. When he resisted, a stick whipped down across his shoulders. He hardly felt the sting through the rush of rage and adrenaline.

He was staring the guy right in the eyes, and the guy started looking a little scared. Ray grinned smugly, dangerously. He'd seen this guy's picture during his briefing. Now Ray started walking again without another glance as if he had already dispensed with the man. "Hey, Carlo," he called. "How's your pretty wife? I bet she's lonely. I could have a couple of my guys visit her in that crappy apartment of yours down on Conway. How about it?"

The block went silent, and then a buzz started that quickly died down. Ray didn't have to look to know that every eye was straining to see Carlo.

"Armando! Hey, Armando, I didn't mean nothin'. It was a joke. Armando!"

He walked away from Carlo's desperate tones, keeping the wolfish grin on his face for all to see. Langoustini knew that nothing scared people half so much as making a threat and then looking as if he was anticipating

carrying it out. Ray, planting one foot after another, wanted nothing better than to reach his cell and lie down on his cot.

Once he got there, they left him in his chains and locked the door. He sat on the cot in misery. He couldn't lie down because the collar pressed into his throat, and if he sat, just holding his head and shoulders up had become a burden. Hours later, just before five, a pair of armed guards came and removed everything but the shackles on his legs. Ray lay down with his face to the wall and slept through dinner.

Fraser was feeling a bit unnerved. He had arrived at the Vecchio home just after the new Riviera, and the hand-wringing and wailing over what the neighbors might think had truly been something to see. Compared to his own parents, who went months without expressing a strong emotion in words or gestures, Ray's mother and sisters were quite astonishing in their range of expression. If Ray had been there he would have left long before the scene had played itself out. Bound by his sense of responsibility, Fraser stayed until the curtain fell. As his reward, he was asked to dinner.

Given a free choice, he wouldn't have stayed. What had passed between himself and Ray the night before was still fresh in his mind. How he could have lost control of himself to that extent, he had no idea. He had never kissed anyone who hadn't wanted to be kissed—in fact, too many times it had been the other way around. Fraser had let his emotions carry him away. Now he knew for certain, with a hollow, sinking feeling, that Ray's need for him was completely different from his for Ray. Ray needed Fraser as a partner and a friend. Last night he had revealed that he

had been hurt by what he saw as Fraser's abandonment, as strange as that might seem after his own earlier abandonment of Fraser. But that kind of hurt and that kind of need were a long way from love.

Right now, Ray was in the Feds' hands, incognito. As long he was there, Fraser wouldn't move to the park or leave for home. He would honor his promise and be Ray's backup.

When he asked Mrs. Vecchio if he could help in the kitchen, she shook her head, and with a knowing little smile, told him to sit in the living room with Francesca. Fraser hoped that he and Francesca were beyond that point, but Francesca couldn't resist flirting with him for a few minutes, just to see what would happen. When his embarrassed and stumbling responses seemed to bore her, she took up the remote and turned on the T.V.

Mrs. Vecchio's voice came from the kitchen. "*Cara*, don't you have something to talk about with the charming young man? Why are you watching that stupid box?"

"I'm just gonna watch the news, Ma," Frannie bellowed back. In the Fraser household, no one had ever spoken above a normal conversational tone. Of course, their home had been much smaller than the Vecchios'. Fraser found this yelling back and forth between rooms quite disconcerting. But then he discovered something more disturbing yet on the television screen.

It was the image of a man, loaded down with chains, walking through the entrance of the Chicago Central Prison flanked by an armed guard. "The mystery of the Bookman's disappearance is solved," the commentator was saying. "Thought to have been killed in a gun battle in Chicago last year when a gun-running operation was foiled, the infamous mob boss from Vegas is now said to have been recuperating from a gunshot wound in solitary confinement in Marion Prison. His trial on gun-running charges starts this month in Chicago." Fraser glanced at Francesca and knew

immediately that she recognized her brother. She opened her mouth to alert the whole household, and Fraser put his hand over it.

Her eyes got wide, and Fraser became conscious that his fingers were touching her soft lips. He snatched his hand away quickly, as if he had been burned. Frannie's eyes were furious. "Benton, what are you doing? That's Ray!"

"I know, Francesca. He's on a very dangerous assignment. Do you really want your mother to know about it now?"

She stared at him, distraught. "He promised he wouldn't do this again. He promised Ma he wouldn't leave."

"It's only for a short time," Fraser said, hoping it was true.

Frannie continued looking at him strangely. "You knew," she said. "You guys must be speaking again,"

"Yes. I'm staying at his apartment. Francesca, don't tell her. Ray told me that the less you knew the safer you'd all be."

She sighed. "You're right. But what if something happens to him?"

"He'll be all right. Ray can take care of himself." Fraser put as much conviction into this statement as he could muster.

Frannie put a hand to her forehead. "That's why when I said I liked the mustache, he said, 'No you don't.' I thought he was just being a jerk."

Fraser's reply was interrupted by Mrs. Vecchio calling, "*Tutta la famiglia a tavola per mangiare!*" The family was about to sit down at table and Ray wasn't here. He was confined in a place where harm could come to him at any time, or maybe it already had. Fraser's sense of loss from the night before came back tenfold. He wished he could do something to help.

Ray awoke with a start and heard his own brief cry echo through the

darkened cellblock. The darkness seemed to twist the sound, carrying it up and away until it faded into a low drone that could have been an echo or the wind. He hated sleeping in jail, where his cell was connected to hundreds of others in one huge, enclosed space. Little drafts rose and fell, blowing unexpected odors into his face—scents of dampness, dust, and human misery. Ordinary sounds—a snore, the creak of a bedframe, a footfall—were deformed in the great stone room and became something combined and other, unrecognizable, the stuff of nightmares.

Ray shivered. His dream had left him covered in icy sweat. As he groped awkwardly for the blanket at the end of the bed, his shackles clinked, and an inmate in a neighboring cell groaned as if in protest. Sitting up, Ray wrapped the blanket around his shoulders. The floor was too cold on his stocking feet, so he drew up his knees and tried to cover as much of himself as possible.

In his dream he had seen Benny die.

In darkness they were chasing someone, some swift presence that never quite resolved itself into human form. First traversing endless alleys, the chase soon rose to the rooftops, where they had to make greater and greater leaps to cross the spaces between buildings. Finally, the buildings grew so tall that they couldn't see anything below but immense somber canyons, filled with shadow. They leapt together, grimly, silently, until they saw the thing they had pursued on the next rooftop, waiting for them, turning to fight. It looked a little like Victoria.

They leapt, and they should have made it, but Benny's foot slipped, and in a second he dangled by the cloth of his uniform jacket bunched tightly in Ray's right hand. But his hand was damp, and the coat was slippery, and Ray could only watch as it slipped inexorably from his grasp. He wanted to grab Benny with his left hand, too, but if he had let go of the parapet they would have fallen together. Instead, he clung to the forlorn hope that his

grip would hold, would save them both. It didn't.

Benny fell. Even now that he was awake, Ray could still see Benny's body spiraling down into the shadows. Ray wondered why he hadn't gone down with him.

Kevin would have told him that the dream meant something. To Ray it meant that he was lonely and miserable and that his mind was playing tricks on him, bringing up the one person he didn't dare dwell on. The one time of the day he could relax and be himself, think his own thoughts, he was tormented by nightmares.

A little starlight filtered through the huge skylight, allowing Ray to see the bars of his cell, but nothing much beyond. He was blind, shackled, locked in, without even a watch to tell him the time. This was what he hated most about prison—the complete and humiliating loss of control. Ray told himself that the first night was always the worst. Determined to rest, he lay on his side, still wrapped in the blanket. When dawn finally started seeping through the skylight, he slept.

At eight, long after breakfast, a guard woke him to tell him that his lawyer had arrived.

She sat down and picked up the receiver, watching the man on the other side of the glass. She'd seen his picture, although they'd never met, but he looked so different that Penny had to look twice to be sure it was the right man. As he clanked his manacled hands down on the counter and picked up the phone at his side, she saw that he had chafe marks on his wrists and a badly split lip with a dark bruise extending up the side of his face. His eyes were sunken in their orbits, and he looked whip thin. The manacles attached to the chain around his waist were so short that he

had to tilt his head a little to hold the receiver to his ear. Not all inmates had to wear cuffs to answer the phone, but Langoustini was considered dangerous.

"Good morning, Mr. Langoustini. I'm Penny Nelson, from Pittman, Nelson, and Strauss. I'm your attorney."

"I know who you are," Langoustini said, sizing her up. "In the old days, I used to rate a partner, but now I get daddy's little girl."

"Have they mistreated you, Mr. Langoustini?" Penny asked with professional concern, trying to ignore his rudeness. "You don't look well."

Langoustini shrugged, and even that small movement seemed to cost him. "It was a bumpy road," he said, smiling grimly. "How many years you been out of law school, anyway?"

"This is my third year with the firm." Penny tried not to let it faze her. As a female attorney who had to interact with criminal clients on a daily basis, she had learned to keep her cool no matter how obnoxious they turned out to be, and this one promised to be exceptional. Even with bruises on his face, he looked in control, with his hooded eyes and his sardonic, superior smile. She hated that curl of his lip already, but she was here for the firm's business, not her own amusement. "My father apologizes for not being able to come in person. He had a very important hearing this morning." She had trouble believing that her father had taken this man's case, let alone that he was handling it personally. Langoustini most definitely was not their usual class of client.

"Yeah, I got it. Very important. And I'm chopped liver." His pale green eyes stared into hers, daring her to look away first. "Listen, honey, when I hired your pop two years ago, I broke a family tradition. I didn't want the same law firm that my uncles and cousins had hired since the 50's. I wanted a firm with some brains, and some class, and I was willing to pay the price because I thought you guys could

deliver the service. So, tell me, Penny, how much longer was your pop gonna leave me rotting in Marion?"

Penny's father had asked her to take this appointment only this morning, and she was flying blind. "I'm sure my firm did its best to expedite your transfer to Chicago," she said evenly.

"Yeah, right," he scoffed. "I just want this trial to go down, see? I'm innocent, and they kept me in jail for a year. This is America. I have rights."

"They actually left you in Marion for a year without a trial?" she asked, so shocked she forgot herself.

"That's right. I had a bullet wound, but it wasn't all that bad."

"How could they justify that?"

Langoustini chuckled softly. "Not 'how,' 'why.' The answer is punishment. I got up somebody's nose. I always seem to be doing that." He smiled a little more broadly now, but there was little warmth in it. "You're supposed to tell me when the hearing is, aren't you, sweetheart?" he prompted.

"The preliminary hearing is a week from this Tuesday," Penny said, trying to think of reassuring things to say. "My father is preparing your defense personally."

"Great," he said curtly. "I'll be there." He studied her face and then chuckled. "You're clueless, aren't you, honey? Did pop just give me to you this morning?"

"Yes," she admitted, abashed. On her own cases, Penny did meticulous research. Today, with such short notice, she was relying on information left for her by her father, and he had left precious little.

"So, you're my babysitter, Penny? I think you better get up to speed on my case."

"I'm just here to check with you and make sure your rights aren't being violated.

A senior partner will handle the trial." She wondered for the hundredth time why her father had insisted on taking this case. The only explanation she could come up with was money, and that wasn't very reassuring. This man was nothing but a gangster, a Mafioso, and not at all a typical client for her firm, but until she had more information, she was going to do what she'd been asked to do. "Are you sure you weren't beaten by someone on your way here? Do you think you're being deliberately persecuted?"

Absently, Langoustini started to raise a hand to his head and was brought up short by the chain. He threw it a look and lowered his hand. "Hey, shit happens, sweetheart. You know, there's still a lot of prejudice in this country against Italians. You mention you're Italian and people assume right away you must be connected to the Mafia. Did you ever hear of anything so stupid?"

Penny struggled to calm herself, but this man was really getting under her skin. He was toying with her. She felt her face flush with anger. "Mr. Langoustini, if you don't want me to file a complaint about your injuries, then I'll be leaving. Is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

His lopsided grin grew as salacious as it could around the wound on his lower lip. "Well," he began, "now that you mention it..."

She braced herself, sure that he was about to make an obscene suggestion.

He surprised her. "Could you make them give me some clean clothes and let me have a shower and shave? And I've gotta get out of these damn leg cuffs."

"Yes, I can do that. Anything else?"

"I need some exercise and fresh air. Maybe I could eat meals in the cafeteria and go in the yard every day."

"I would think you'd rather not," she said, surprised. "It might be dangerous."

"Nah, I gotta circulate, maybe turn up some clients," he said vaguely.

Penny wasn't even sure what his

specialty was, but she was sure she wouldn't like it. "I'll put in that request for you."

He smiled, not so unpleasantly this time. "And when are you coming to see me again?"

"Our contract specifies twice per week," she said. "Today is Tuesday, so someone will be here Thursday and again on Monday. Then, of course, we'll pick you up for the hearing on Tuesday."

"That's right." He nodded. "Good girl. Make sure I have a nice suit. Better have it sent from Vegas. And tell your pop to come next time in case I wanna conduct some business. Have him tell the family that everything is fine."

Penny went right to the warden and conveyed Langoustini's demands. After a little money changed hands, everything was arranged. As her father, in one of his sardonic moods, often said, sometimes it just took a word in the right ear, and a hand in the right pocket, to safeguard a prisoner's rights. Chicago Central was the most corrupt prison in the state. Penny hated contributing to that corruption instead of exposing it. It depressed her even further that she wasn't working for someone who seemed like a worthier cause.

As Penny waited for the last security gate to open, she thought about her reactions to Langoustini. He had been one of her father's personal clients for about a year before his time in Marion, long before Penny had joined the firm. Her father had even flown out to Vegas a few times to see him personally. Why would her father take on a man who so obviously was engaged in organized crime? Although they did defend a lot of high-profile criminals, they were mostly white collar, not Mafia. She remembered the message that Langoustini had given her. Could her father really be passing messages to a Mafia family? And if Langoustini was a valued client, why

hadn't her father worked harder to get him out of Marion in a more timely fashion? Something wasn't right here.

On the way out she heard her name and turned to see another young lawyer from the firm. "Hi, Brad," she said. "Do you want to share a cab?"

"Sure." They walked out into the sunlight. It was early June, and the air was fine and blustery. The muggy summer weather hadn't set in yet. "I was just talking to a client who's so spaced she doesn't know she's in jail," Brad said with the air of someone who can't wait to impart an anecdote. "Get this—she thinks she's staying at the Waldorf. She doesn't even know what city she's in. She wanted me to order room service." He laughed. "What did you draw this morning?"

"Langoustini," she said curtly, not really wanting to discuss it.

Brad whistled. "Holy shit, you got the big fish. There are all kinds of rumors. Do you think it's really him?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" she asked defensively.

"He didn't surface for a year, and people were saying he was dead. Maybe someone's impersonating him."

"Like who?"

Brag shrugged. "An FBI agent?"

Penny thought about the bruises, the painful shrug, the chains. What operative would go to those lengths to get so deeply involved in the character that he practically martyred himself? On the other hand, some FBI plants were found out partly because they took small comforts that most prisoners didn't get. Maybe this guy was different, a perfectionist. Accepting Brad's suggestion would let her dad off the hook, but she just didn't buy it yet. She needed to do some more digging, and in any case she wasn't about to feed the rumor mill about one of Dad's clients. "It was him," she said firmly.

The wheels of a bureaucracy grind slowly.

By lunchtime, the request had filtered through that Langoustini be allowed to eat in the cafeteria. Unfortunately, he still had the leg irons and nothing had been said about the shower and shave.

Ray shuffled through the line. Having slept through two meals, he was starving, and he almost made a stupid blunder by not paying enough attention to his surroundings. As he took a step, he felt something brush his leg, and realized that someone had stuck a foot on his chain, trying to trip him up. Stopping, he aimed with his elbow and threw his weight back. He was rewarded with a gasp when he struck soft flesh. He turned awkwardly, trying not to fall, and grabbed the guy by the throat. The pale, round, very young face framed by cropped black bangs jumped out at him from an encounter five years before. It was Damien McCall, a guy about ten years younger than Ray. Ray had put him away for armed robbery. He hadn't known that McCall was back inside, but it figured.

Ray hoped no spark of recognition had shown in his eyes. "Are you messing with me, punk?" he asked menacingly. "You trying to make me fall on my face? I don't think you know who you're screwing with here."

McCall laughed and relaxed into Ray's grip as if he didn't fear him enough to struggle. "You're the new boy on the block—Mr. Bookman." When McCall smiled, his thin lips drew back to reveal tiny rounded teeth like a baby's.

Ray shoved him away in disgust. "I can't kill a guy my first day here. Then they won't let me have a shower. Walk in front of me, punk." McCall cut forward in the line, looking back at Ray and laughing. Ray ignored him. McCall hadn't seemed to know him, but he was a game player from way back, and he wasn't stupid.

"Watch your back, Bookman," McCall shouted.

Ray knew he needed to do just that.

After lunch a guard finally removed the shackles, and Ray had a shower and a shave. He felt almost human again. He got himself lined up for a phone call, and spoke to one of his Vegas lieutenants for the first time in a year.

"Hey, Monte, it's me," he said. Ray should have been nervous. The whole plan hinged on this call. To get Charlie to trust him, he'd have to show that he still controlled his old network. Without that, he was of no use to his old associate. Strangely, he felt calm, as if he wasn't dissembling at all, but really was the man who was supposed to be making this call. He remembered this feeling from a year ago. This was how deep in character he had been the day Fraser and Kowalski walked in.

"Boss?" Monte's tenor voice spoke a nasal Brooklynese. "Jesus, Boss, is that really you? We started thinking you was dead."

"Nah, they can't kill me that easy. I was too fucked up to move for a while, though."

"For a whole year?"

"Six months, anyway," Ray said. "My lawyer's a deadbeat."

"Dump him, Boss, and find a lawyer in Vegas," Monte said. "You know, Bustamente is okay."

"Yeah, you telling me what to do?" Ray asked belligerently.

"No, Boss, no."

"That's all I need," Ray went on angrily, feeling like he had the upper hand, "a goddamn mob lawyer. I need a respectable guy like this one."

"Yeah, Boss, you're right." Monte sounded thoroughly cowed, and Ray decided to strike.

"Listen, my time's almost up. Is business going okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Not like in your time, because Guido ain't such a go-getter, but the

lawyers passed us some stuff from you that worked out pretty good. That Alamo Trucking deal was sweet."

"I take care of my own," Ray said, not even wanting to know what they'd done to Alamo Trucking at the FBI's suggestion. "I'm back in circulation, and I'm gonna keep a closer eye on things, you know what I mean? My trial's coming up, and I'll get off. I'll be back in a couple of months, tops."

"That's great, Mr. Langoustini." Monte was sweating. Ray could hear it, and he smiled wickedly.

"Just make sure everything's good," he said. "I might need something from you real soon. Give my love to Cousin Guido."

The next day was Wednesday, and Ray watched out for Charlie Figaro at breakfast and lunch, but didn't see him. No one seemed to be bothering Ray right now. Even McCall was staying out of his face. Ray started to dare think that the punk hadn't recognized him.

Without the shackles he slept better, and he began to settle into the routine of prison life. Eat, sleep, do what you're told, watch your back. He was so inside Langoustini now that he didn't often think of his life as Vecchio, but mostly of his year in Vegas. He remembered sitting inside the cool walls of that adobe mansion, sipping on buttermilk and doing business. Ray Vecchio hated buttermilk, but somehow during that time he'd adjusted to drinking three or four glasses a day.

Charlie finally showed up at dinner, looking a little disoriented.

"Hey, Armando," he said when he saw Ray. "Long time no see."

It wasn't very original, but it was an opening. "Hey, Charlie, how long you been inside?"

"Eighteen months," Charlie said

sullenly. "Got another six. You?"

"My trial starts soon. Maybe I'll beat the rap."

"That's great. You know, they were saying you were dead."

"Yeah. Everybody says that." Ray let Armando's annoyance at hearing it over and over show in his face.

"Sorry, man," Charlie said sheepishly. "I'm just saying what I heard."

Ray wondered again if it was really true that Charlie had nuclear weapons to sell. He seemed as timid as ever. How did he get the nerve to pull off a heist like that? Ray had to wait for Charlie to come to him for help with that problem, and leaving now might be the best way to accomplish that.

Ray got his tray and started to walk away. "See you around, Charlie."

"Uh, Armando?"

"Yeah?"

"Could you and me talk sometime? I mean—" he looked around furtively. "I got something to ask you."

"Sure, Charlie," Ray said, going off to sit alone. "Maybe tomorrow." When Charlie was ready, he'd pop. Funny how things were going like clockwork.

Thursday, after breakfast, Ray was told his lawyer had come. Holding out his wrists for the chains, he saw his hands shaking and realized that it made Armando furious to be trussed up like this. Ray didn't like to be powerless, either, but he could stand it for a while if he had to. Ray knew what he'd be thinking if he really were Langoustini—about revenge, about how soon he could strike back for this humiliation.

He trudged out to the visiting room and sat in his assigned place. A moment later, John Nelson joined him. He was sturdily built like an ex-football player, with large cheeks and a full head of gray hair. Ray noted his impeccable suit with a touch of envy.

They said their greetings, and Ray felt good that someone who knew the plan was here. "Your daughter's cute," he said, "but do you think you could have briefed her a little better?"

John laughed softly. "No," said. "She's new to the firm, and she's got a lot to learn—I don't want her involved in this. No offense, Mr. Langoustini, but your case wouldn't be her favorite thing."

"I'm innocent," Ray said stubbornly.

"Yes, of course." Nelson dared to smile.

Ray said the code words that told Nelson that things were on schedule with Charlie. By Monday he hoped he could pass on the location, and Tuesday he'd be out of here. There followed a discussion of the fine points of the case, during which Ray's mind began to wander.

It couldn't be good for Nelson's reputation to have the Bookman on his client list. Ray wondered, not for the first time, what the man was getting out of it. Ray had heard that Nelson had personal reasons for posing as Langoustini's defender—a relative in the FBI who had been killed during an undercover assignment, or something like that. Who knew if it was true? Maybe he was getting paid twice, once by the family and once by the Feds, for keeping Ray's ass out of the fire. Idly, Ray wished he knew what the family was paying Nelson for preparing a fictitious case, to be presented only if Ray hadn't succeeded in his objective by the Tuesday preliminary hearing.

"So, if we can establish that the arrest was improper the case will be dismissed," Nelson was concluding.

"So I can finally go home and get back to my business," Ray said testily. "Hey, do you think I have grounds for a lawsuit? They kept me in jail for a year, and now my case is gonna be dismissed."

"Let's see if the judge accepts my

arguments first, Mr. Langoustini," Nelson said, frowning. "Then we'll decide what our next move should be."

Ray agreed, and they said their good-byes. Of course, none of it mattered anyway, because their whole conversation had just been a smoke screen. If, by Tuesday, Ray had already succeeded in brokering Charlie's deal, the Bookman would die on his way out of court, publicly and in a way that would leave no doubt. That had been one of Ray's conditions.

Charlie came to him at lunch, eager to talk.

"Listen, Armando, I got something good. It's a really sweet deal, but it's gotta be just between you and me. It's a—"

"Wait a second." Ray held up his hand. "You know what I always say about doing business. Don't tell me your secrets unless you make them my secrets, too. I can't protect your secrets, Charlie. I got enough of my own shit to worry about. So, until we have a deal, don't spill the details."

"All right, Armando," Charlie said eagerly, "but I know you're gonna go for this one. It's some arms—something really special—and there's a militia group that wants what I got."

"So, sell it to them," Ray said disinterestedly.

"That's the thing, they don't trust me."

"I wonder why not?" Langoustini smiled to see Charlie blush.

"You could do it, though. They'd trust you."

"Maybe I could. Are you offering? What's the cut?"

"Twenty."

Ray snorted. "I get thirty-five, you know that."

"But I have to pay off the guys who did the job for me. And you know this ain't peanuts. This is such big money that your

twenty will seem like forty."

Ray laughed at his logic. "Tell me more," he said.

In the end it was so easy that Ray ~~couldn't believe it. He worked out~~ everything with Charlie and then called Monte and asked him to set it up. As soon as the militia guys learned the deal had the Bookman's cachet on it and heard the details from Monte, they'd go for it—at least that was the theory. Then Charlie would reveal the weapons' whereabouts, and before telling Monte, Ray would tell Nelson, who would tell the Bureau. Then Carson and Dulles could move in and bust Liberty's Army, Charlie's guys, and the Bookman's network all at the same time.

It was all so perfect that Ray, like any good cop, had some lingering doubts. He shrugged them aside, figuring they were just a side effect of his apprehension about what he'd do once the assignment was over. He didn't enjoy prison, but the thought of going back and facing his life again was more daunting still. Too bad there wasn't any chance of taking over the Bookman's life again. But he didn't want that, did he?

Ray reprimanded himself for entertaining these confused and painful thoughts. If he kept this up, he'd lose his focus. The assignment had to come first.

Ray felt a little excited after his talk with Charlie at lunch, and maybe that's why he forgot that the best place to avoid in jail is the shower room. Given the chance for a shower after three days, Ray couldn't resist. As soon as he got in there and got soaped up, McCall and a pair of guys came in, and Ray knew he'd been enormously stupid. Two of them carried metal pipes, and one carried a mop. In prison, anything

that comes to hand can be a weapon.

But Ray had nothing to hand. Everything in the shower room that wasn't fastened down had been torn off long ago. Ray's heart started pounding. He faced them with nothing but his wits and a borrowed reputation, ~~and that wouldn't be enough.~~ All he could picture in his mind was blood on the tile—he'd get beaten up, thrown in the prison infirmary if he wasn't dead already. No one would be back to check on Langoustini until Monday. Ray would never get a chance to complete his mission and get out of here.

While McCall paused inside the doorway, savoring his moment, Ray moved quickly to the other entrance and found it locked. It was obvious that they had a guard watching the doors for them. McCall had been in here a while and he had allies. Ray had underestimated him. How many people would believe McCall if he said Langoustini was actually the cop who had sent him down? Probably plenty.

Ray was afraid, but the Bookman got off on situations like this. He felt an insane euphoria rising with the fear in his chest, the urge to charge his three attackers and die if he had to. Pushing away that impulse, Ray backed up warily. He felt split between rage and terror, and he wasn't sure which was more dangerous.

The shower room was like a square donut, with shower heads around the perimeter and the middle. Ray tried moving in front of the three goons, keeping out of reach. When they got him in a corner, he knew he'd be dead.

"What do you want, punk? I don't remember inviting you," he said, trying to slow things down with talk. He kept thinking that screaming might attract help, but he couldn't do it. It would bring the three of them charging down on him, erasing any advantage he might have. If only Fraser were here, like the last time he was in prison. The two of them could have taken these three.

And then there was another reason not to cry out: the Bookman didn't scream. He couldn't lose that much face. He'd fight them like an animal until he was torn apart.

"I didn't need an invitation. We had a date." McCall shoved one of his guys towards the other side of the enormous room to head Ray off. Ray was going to get cornered now, and it wouldn't take long for them to do whatever they wanted to do.

"We didn't have no date," he said, glancing behind him. He was closing on a corner of the donut. "I don't even know your—"

"Vecchio." The name hung there between the echoing tiles.

"Your name's Vecchio?" Ray asked innocently. "You're Italian? Eh, *paisan*."

"Fuck off, asshole," McCall said viciously.

"Look, I don't know who you are or what you're playing at," Ray said evenly. "Nobody fucks with the Bookman and gets away with it. I got guys—"

"It's McCall," the young man interrupted. "Damien McCall. You sent me up for armed robbery. Now you're pretending to be the Bookman."

"You know, it's guys like you who damage my reputation." Ray kept his mouth moving while he thought. He had a plan. It wasn't much good as plans went, and it required a lot of luck to accomplish, but it might even the odds a little. "I don't know where these rumors get started. First I'm dead, then I'm a cop. Fuck that, you know?" He started moving slowly toward the other side of the showers where the single guy was approaching. If he could fight off that guy fast and get his stick while the others couldn't see—well, he'd have a better chance. Not much better, and he had to be quick. "Maybe it's just that people are afraid of me. Maybe a couple of guys who crossed me have reason to be. You hear that, McCall?"

Ray jumped for the guy and actually toppled him. The stick swung at him, but Ray twisted out of the way and grabbed the end as it slammed down on his hands. He cried out but didn't lose his grip. Unable to wrench the weapon from those strong hands, he lashed out a couple of times hard with his heel until blood ran from the guy's face on the tile, and the stick was in his hands. As McCall's second guy ran towards him, Ray aimed the end of the broomstick at his belly and shoved. As it drove against him, the guy screamed and went down writhing. And then the thing Ray dreaded happened—as he absorbed the force of the guy's impact with the broom, the soap that was still dripping off Ray and the water on the floor made his feet skid and he went down, struggling to keep his footing, as the guy whose face he'd kicked grabbed at him.

Lying on the floor with only the stick to protect him, Ray was fighting up at two men with metal pipes, until a couple of blows struck his fingers hard and he dropped it. A blow connected with his head, thumping it against the tile so hard his ears rang, and he struggled to his knees, crawling away as the blows rained down. He screamed and pounded on the door, wondering vaguely why he hadn't done that in the first place.

Suddenly the blows stopped, and someone grabbed him by his feet and dragged him back. He struggled, dreading what was coming, but the weight of a body pinned him to the floor. McCall's friend pressed the pipe against his neck, crushing his face into the wet tiles and cutting off his air. He could see McCall's shoe just in front of his face, and he could bet he was going to taste it in a minute.

"Okay, Vecchio. My friend Jordan is gonna fuck you up the ass, and I'll just watch and enjoy it." He squatted down and patted Ray's face. "I hope I didn't hit you on the head too hard, because I want you to be awake for this."

Ray was gasping for breath, and when the pipe came off his neck, he felt a second of

relief until the fear took hold of him, sheeting through him like lightning.

He was going to be raped.

He'd never imagined himself in this position. Sure, it happened to lots of guys in prison. Ray felt vaguely sorry whenever he thought about that, but he never imagined what it was like to be the guy face down on the floor about to have his guts ripped up by somebody's dick.

He was going to be raped. He started to shake from terror and cold.

"Look at him," McCall said happily. "He's scared."

No. Ray's mind filled with a silent shout of protest. *No, he wouldn't let it happen. He'd rather die.*

At the edge of his vision, the pipe clanked down on the tiles, and then Jordan's weight lifted off him. Ray heard snaps being undone.

The pipe. He could see it, and he knew he had only half a second to act. He grabbed it, rolled, and swung with all his might. Blood exploded from Jordan's nose.

Then something hit Ray's head so hard that couldn't stop his hands from opening and letting the pipe bounce away. His mind went blank and he fell into darkness.

The first thing Ray felt again was the throbbing pain in his head. It seemed to fill the universe, and when he moved, the universe spun. It was a long time before he realized that his eyes were closed and managed to open them, only to see that he was alone in semi-darkness—in a cell, not the infirmary—lying on a thin mattress. He groaned to realize he was in solitary, and he didn't even know how long he'd been out. Ray's body seemed to float some distance away from him, attached by a nerve. He knew he was hurting; he knew from the smell that he'd thrown up and peed

himself, and that there was blood in his mouth and nostrils. He hurt so many places, but he didn't hurt *there*. Maybe he hadn't been raped. They were letting him sleep, and he had a concussion. He wondered how bad it was as he passed out again.

What day was it? How could even his high-priced lawyer get to him here? After hours of lying in the dark fading in and out, Ray came to with a higher level of awareness. This time he remembered to try to move his limbs, and found that he was dressed. Someone had chained him as he had been on his arrival with his hands in front of him. His legs were cramping up, so he tried to roll on his side. That was a mistake. Something in his side hurt with a furious, burning pain. He groaned, and then was suddenly conscious—as if he'd passed out and come to again—that someone was in the cell with him. He moved, trying to see.

"Hey, Langoustini, you're back with us." It was not an unfriendly voice, but Ray didn't think he'd heard it before.

"Yeah." His voice was hoarse and faint. Was there any part of him that wasn't damaged? A line from an old joke nagged at his mind. *Yeah, but you should have seen the other guy.* Today it wasn't funny.

"Are you okay? I brought you some food."

"I need a doctor. I got hit on the head pretty hard," Ray murmured.

There was a laugh. "A doctor? It's Sunday, pal. Tomorrow, maybe. Listen, you're lucky that knock on the head is all you got. The way I heard it, you were this close to getting screwed. One of the guards heard all the noise and saved your ass." He laughed loudly at his own pun.

"I need some water," Ray said hoarsely.

"Right there on the tray," the guard answered.

Ray finally saw him as he went out the

door. He looked around, and after what felt like hours he found the tray sitting right next to him. He couldn't sit up, so he rolled on his side and somehow took the plastic cup into his hands and drank from it before fading out again.

A voice woke him. "Mr. Langoustini, are you ready to be unchained so I can see how badly you're injured? I don't want any fight from you."

"Go ahead," Ray mumbled. "No fight. What day is it?" When he spoke his mouth hurt so badly he realized he must have gotten busted in the chops again.

"Monday, around noon." Hands clinked the chains and they fell away from his hands and shoulders. He lay on his back with his hands at his sides and bit his lip against the pain from moving. "What... what happened?" he said.

"Do you remember anything?"

"They were trying to kill me," Ray said. "Who are you?"

"I'm the doctor, of course. No one else will be allowed to see you for at least several days."

"My preliminary hearing..."

"When is it?"

"Tuesday," he whispered.

"Sorry. You won't make that." The doctor unfastened his clothes and looked him over. "Do you know that you ruptured someone's spleen?"

Ray tried to smile. "Self-defense. What did they do to me?"

"You've been badly beaten. Your head's the worst. Can you see out of both eyes?"

Suddenly Ray wasn't sure. "I think so." The doctor bent down and shone a light in one eye, then the other.

"Follow my finger. Look this way. Now over here. Good. Yes, you have a concussion. I don't think anything's broken,

though you might have a cracked rib or two."

Ray took a breath and felt that sharp pain in his side. "Great," he said, "are you sure?"

"It could just be bruised."

"I want my lawyer."

~~"You're in solitary. No visitors. Do you want some pain killer?"~~

"How about some tylenol?"

The doc sounded surprised. "No morphine?"

"No." Ray did want it, desperately, but he didn't want anything else happening without his control. He needed his mind back, even if it cost him in pain. "Look, I wasn't kidding about self-defense. That was three against one."

"That's not how Mr. McCall told it. He said that you went after the other two guys and he was just an innocent bystander."

"Yeah, right." Ray tried to laugh, but his head hurt so much he gasped. "That's why I was naked and he was knocking me out with a pipe."

A laugh. "I guess. Let me help you get into some clean clothes before I go."

Ray let the man turn him and lift him. A wet towel was put into his hands, and he was able to wipe some of the blood off his face and head and the stink off the rest of his body. But for long afterwards he was desperately sorry he'd moved at all.

That was the last he remembered for a while.

This time he knew it was a dream while he was in it. He was back in Vegas, and Nero was running the blender. Five or six of his guys were there, sitting in his sunken living room having drinks. They were talking business. Charlie was there, but he didn't look so good. He was pale and his eyes kept shifting around as if he was afraid.

"What's the matter, Charlie?" Langoustini asked. "Don't you feel safe in my

house? I got a security system. Best money can buy." But Charlie kept moving, sending his terrified glance all around the room.

And then it was as if the sunken living room slouched and filled up with water like a pool, a deep pool with grottos and dark recesses under the surface, and Ray couldn't see where the guys had gone. They just seemed to bend and melt into the water until there was nothing left but churning fins, fins and teeth, and the water ran red with Charlie's blood, and maybe his blood, too, he couldn't tell. He yelled for Nero but the blender just got louder, and then it shifted from his head to the outside world. Ray woke up and heard the buzzer that called the inmates to breakfast.

Suddenly everything that had happened in the last week seemed to come into focus. Damn, he'd been a fool. It had all been too easy. Something was wrong.

It was Sunday night, late, but Fraser wasn't sleeping. He was lying in Ray's bed, staring out the open drapes at the night sky of Chicago, feeling a bit displaced. Never having quite overcome his awe of tall buildings, Fraser disliked sleeping in them. He preferred being closer to the ground, in the open air, not separated from the sky by a pane of glass.

That said, he didn't really mind being here. Despite Ray's suggestion, he hadn't changed the sheets, telling himself that he didn't want to waste water by washing them, but knowing the truth was that he enjoyed being surrounded by Ray's scent, found it comforting in the man's absence.

The apartment building at night was full of small sounds. There were Diefenbaker's snores from the living room, where he seemed to have become quite partial to Ray's armchair, but there were also creaks and shudders from the building itself, from

the late spring Chicago wind that caromed against the windows. Underneath it all, Fraser detected a set of sounds more subtle and difficult to interpret: the furtive movements of the building's inhabitants.

What was Ray doing now? Was he asleep in a cell, or, like Fraser, was he thinking about his friends or family? Fraser wondered again about the details of the assignment and why Ray had been so unsure how long it would take. He hoped that the FBI was taking precautions to safeguard Ray in jail. Fraser had tried to reassure himself about Ray's safety earlier in the day, but, Lieutenant Welsh, while sympathetic, couldn't tell him any details.

Fraser heard a ring, far away. He realized he had been asleep and that it was Ray's phone ringing in the other room. Awkwardly, he grabbed at the extension and finally got it to his ear.

"Vecchio residence," he said efficiently, and then realized it was 3 o'clock in the morning. Anyone calling then was either a wrong number or a family emergency—in either case, there was no use announcing the resident's name, especially since Fraser was nominally supposed to be impersonating him.

At first there seemed to be no one on the line, but then Fraser heard a small intake of breath, as if someone was making up his mind to speak. "Is something wrong?" he asked. "Who's on the line, please?"

"Who are you?" came a hesitant male voice. "A friend of Vecchio's? I thought I'd get his mother."

"A friend, yes. I can pass a message to his mother for you," Fraser said helpfully.

A laugh. "I don't think she'd enjoy hearing this."

"Is something wrong?" Alarmed, Fraser sat up in bed.

"Vecchio went down," the voice said. "And his handlers—I don't know who they are, but it looks like they're setting him up to take a fall. The guy he made a deal with is a fraud. He was planted. He hasn't got the goods, and he

can't deliver. That's all I—"

"When you say that Vecchio 'went down,' what exactly do you mean?" Fraser's voice remained steady as his insides turned to ice.

"A couple of guys nailed him in the showers. Gave him a nasty bang on the head, among other things. When I first saw him, there was so much blood I thought he was dead. But he gave them something to remember him by. Took a couple of them down with him, but not the main guy."

"You saw him, sir? Do you work at the jail? Who are you?" Fraser heard the edge in his own voice as he tried to keep talking, to get more information from this mysterious voice.

There was a pause. "I met him a long time ago. I know he's a cop. So do the guys that took him. Somebody ought to look out for him."

The connection clicked off.

Fraser left the apartment at dawn, knowing that Lieutenant Welsh usually got in at six.

Carson was furious. "Constable Fraser, Detective Vecchio had no business telling you anything about his assignment, let alone where to find—"

"Detective Vecchio told me nothing, sir," Fraser said earnestly, facing down the other man's anger. "I guessed that he was going undercover, and he declined to tell me more."

Carson closed the file he had been reading. "Well, then, how—"

"This morning I received an anonymous call warning me that Detective Vecchio was seriously injured. I went to see Lieutenant Welsh, who told me where to find you, Agent Carson. He's concerned about Detective Vecchio's wellbeing, as am I."

Sitting back in his desk chair, Carson gripped the armrests. "In that case you

have nothing to worry about, Constable. Making sure that Ray is safe is our top priority."

Fraser looked down for a second, gathering his resolve before meeting Carson's eyes. He disliked calling people liars to their face, but this time there was no way around it. "I do not know you, sir, but judging from my past experience with the FBI, I have trouble believing that."

"Be that as it may," Carson said carefully, steepling his fingers, "you have no jurisdiction here, Constable, and I will not—repeat, I will not—share any details with you. In fact, I have to ask myself what exactly is your interest in this case." He waited. "Well?"

"Are you asking me, Agent Carson, or are you asking yourself?" Fraser said evenly. "If you ask yourself, you'll probably decide I have no interest worth bothering about. But if you ask me, I'll tell you that, as Detective Vecchio's friend and former colleague, I would have a great deal to lose were he to fall in the line of duty."

Carson's manner stiffened even further. His mouth twitched with anger. "I can't help you. If you value Vecchio's life, I'd advise you to stay out of this."

"As I value his life, I can't do that, sir."

Carson stood and looked Fraser in the eyes. "If you don't leave, I'll have you escorted out."

"Thank you for the offer, but there's no need to trouble yourself," Fraser said briskly and turned on his heel, firmly squelching the beginnings of panic burning in his chest. His visit here had been fruitless, but there had to be another way to find out what he needed to know.

Fraser had heard that it cost money even to sit down and converse with a lawyer of John Nelson's stature, and he didn't have any. Well, he had \$250 in grocery money left him by Ray, but he had already spent \$24 of that on

canned chili and rice and inferior beef jerky masquerading as pemmican. He didn't think it would be enough anyway, so he decided to appeal to the man's better nature. Fraser certainly wasn't dressed appropriately. It was unfortunate he couldn't have worn his uniform, or at least his hat. Thank goodness Diefenbaker hadn't insisted on coming. All this ran through his head as he sat in a plush leather chair waiting for the man to arrive.

A young woman walked up to him tentatively. She wore a neat black suit with a tailored white blouse buttoned to the neck and had short brown hair. "Excuse me, but I heard you were waiting for Mr. Nelson?"

Fraser stood. "That's right."

"You didn't have an appointment?"

"No, I'm afraid not. You see something came up—"

"And you were asking about Armando Langoustini." Her searching look immediately caught Fraser's interest.

"Yes, I was. Perhaps you can help me, Miss...?"

"Ms. Nelson," she said curtly. "My father may be detained and I didn't want you to keep waiting, since you might not get a chance to see him. It might be better if you called for an appointment tomorrow."

"Ms. Nelson," Fraser began, "my name is Benton Fraser. I only wanted to inquire whether your father has seen Mr. Langoustini."

"Is Mr. Langoustini an associate of yours, or...?" She let her question trail off. She couldn't see this strange but attractive man having anything to do with a mobster.

"A friend."

"Really?" She could have kicked herself for saying it with such surprise when she saw amusement in the stranger's eyes.

"Yes. But perhaps you're right. I should call." He bowed his head slightly in an old-fashioned way that somehow

seemed perfectly natural, and started to walk away.

"Wait." Penny suddenly wanted to help him; she wasn't sure why. He turned back to her, interest written on his handsome features. "I saw Langoustini last week, and my father saw him Friday. He was supposed to have his preliminary hearing this afternoon, but it's been cancelled. It's public information," she added, as if to convince herself.

"May I inquire as to why the hearing was put off?" Fraser asked, putting his hands behind his back.

She shifted her feet uneasily. Apparently that wasn't public information. "It seems that something happened," she said reluctantly.

Fraser took a step towards her. "Something? You mean he was hurt?"

She responded to the concern in his eyes. "Yes."

"Oh, dear." Fraser said. They studied each other for a moment. In Fraser's eyes Penny saw an urgency she couldn't explain. "Ms. Nelson, I would hate to speak out of turn," Fraser continued, "but what exactly—that is—I meant to ask you exactly what you knew, or how much you knew about—"

"About Mr. Langoustini?" she asked, puzzled to see him so flustered.

He took a deep breath and let it out. "About Ray Vecchio."

In fifteen minutes, Fraser was sitting uncomfortably before the massive wooden desk of John Nelson, Esq.

"So you say that you're an officer of the law, and that you've worked with Detective Vecchio," Nelson was saying sternly, "and yet you admit you have no jurisdiction here. Can you confirm your story?"

"If you'd contact Lieutenant Welsh of the 27th Precinct, I'm sure he'd be glad to give you all the details."

"What is a member of the R.C.M.P.

doing in Chicago?" Nelson asked.

"You see, Mr. Nelson, I first came to Chicago on the trail of the killers of my father..." Fraser broke off unhappily. He had solemnly promised Ray, both Rays, not to do that anymore. It was annoying, and it put people off, both of them had said in nearly the same words. He decided that the best course was to finish quickly. "To make a long story short, I caught them, and have since remained attached to the Canadian Consulate as Deputy Liaison." Fraser's passion for completeness drove him to add: "A position from which I am currently suspended."

The Nelsons gaped at him, both wearing expressions that revealed their family resemblance.

"So you have been relieved of your post?"

"For the moment," Fraser said miserably.

"I think you should leave," Nelson said, and Fraser saw that he had lost the man's attention and goodwill.

"I think Detective Vecchio's cover might have been blown, sir," he said urgently. When Nelson opened his mouth to speak, Fraser continued quickly, holding up his hand. "Oh, he didn't tell me anything about what he was going to do. I just saw the mustache and guessed he was going to be the Bookman again."

"How did you know that?" Nelson asked, white-lipped.

"I'm the one who blew his cover the last time," Fraser said, looking down for a moment. "It was an accident. I walked into a hotel room, and I didn't realize..." He felt as if he was sinking in quicksand, and the more he struggled the deeper he went.

"What do you want me to do? What are you asking for? I can't give you any information. You know enough now to get the man killed, poor devil."

Fraser's face flushed with emotion.

"That's the last thing I want, sir."

Penny looked from one to the other, and finally couldn't keep silent. "You mean Langoustini is an undercover agent? Someone told me that, but I couldn't believe it. He was so obnoxious—so convincing," she corrected herself.

Fraser nodded. "He has a talent for it—undercover, I mean. And, this time, he's playing through a very dangerous situation."

"If he alienated me in a few minutes, I don't suppose he has a lot of friends in jail. What happened to him, Dad?" she asked.

Her father glared at her.

"At least tell him that," she said stubbornly.

He shook his head in frustration. "Oh, all right. He was set upon and beaten rather severely. They have him in solitary, claiming that his injuries aren't life threatening. I have no way of knowing whether they are or not."

"I don't suppose you can tell me," Fraser began, "why he—"

"Why he's actually in Chicago Central? No."

"I see." Fraser was silent for a long time, considering his options. These people seemed to have Ray's best interests at heart, but they might not know the extent of his danger. "I received an anonymous phone call last night," he said, noting that John Nelson's eyes had snapped back to him. "It came to Ray Vecchio's private residence, where I'm staying while he's away. The man on the line told me that Ray had 'gone down,' I think were his exact words. He also said that Agents Carson and Dulles were incompetent..."

"That part's true," Nelson said darkly.

"...and were setting him up to 'take a fall.'"

"Why would they set him up? What would they have to gain?" Penny looked at her father.

"Nothing," said John Nelson. "I suspect that Detective Vecchio has simply been the victim of bad luck. Someone in jail attacked

him just as he was supposed to complete his mission. It's a coincidence."

"What if someone from his past recognized him?" Fraser asked thoughtfully. "That would make it hard for him to accomplish his assignment. Isn't there an escape plan in case he has to get out quickly?"

Nelson shook his head. "You would think so, wouldn't you? The only plan is to get him out when he goes to his preliminary hearing."

"And, at that time, will he just 'escape'?"

"I've already said too much." Nelson rose deliberately and extended his hand. "Good-bye, Mr. Fraser."

Fraser extended his hand. Nelson's hand gripped his firmly and let go as quickly as possible. Looking into two sets of cool blue eyes, Fraser felt a sinking sensation in his chest. He wasn't sure what to do. The Nelsons seemed to be on Ray's side, but how far were they willing to go to save him?

He turned to leave the office, his mind worrying over the problem. Ray had been hurt and no one was caring for him. Fraser had to do something, but what? How could he get into the prison? Stealing again was out of the question. But what if he could do his own undercover operation? What if he found a way to visit Ray? Not Ray, but Armando Langoustini. Obviously, he couldn't go as himself, because, if he were caught, he would compromise Ray's cover again.

He had felt terribly guilty and rather stupid the last time, walking into that hotel room with Ray Kowalski, feeling so overwhelmed by the pleasure of seeing Ray Vecchio again that he had said the first thing that popped into his mind, never wondering what Ray was doing there or why he was wearing that strange mustache.

Perhaps he should just wait to see

what would happen. But then the thought of Ray lying injured, without a friend, in that terrible place galvanized his will. He would go and see if Ray was all right, and he would do it in such a way that only he himself would be hurt if he was intercepted.

Monday afternoon, after the doctor left, seemed endless. Ray wished he'd taken the morphine. With all the pain, his head wasn't clear anyway. He could hear himself moaning when he was half awake, and when the doctor came back on Tuesday, he gave Ray a shot without asking him. After that, hours passed in hazy thoughts and weird dreams. The pain became a dull ache, a feeling that his body was encased in a shell that didn't fit. His fingertips knew his major injuries by now: the swollen jaw and cheekbone, the gash on his head, the tender place on his side. His shoulders and arms were badly bruised, his knees sore to the bone. He was glad there were no mirrors in this place, but it made his experience seem almost surreal, confirmed only by touch but not sight.

Worst of all, he felt weak, so weak that sometimes he wondered if he'd ever get out of this cell. He could get to the toilet without crawling now, but his balance was so off that he had to keep a hand on the wall to make sure he didn't fall on the way there. He was eating what they fed him, trying to get stronger, but Tuesday, with the morphine, he slept through breakfast and lunch.

From the outside he might have seemed tranquil—a man in a hostile environment trying to come back from an overwhelming physical trauma. Many men in his situation might have let their existences become purely physical. Their animal natures would have taken over as their bodies tried to heal. Ray seemed to have split between two parts of his being. On the one hand, his body plodded along, trying to recover. On the other, his mind, instead of going dormant or submitting to what had been done to him, continued to

dwelt on it, a caged animal looking for an escape long after the opportunity had gone. He remembered it all clearly, the terror and pain, and, most of all, the humiliation of being pinned to that cold floor by the body of a man who was ready to rape him.

Ray knew that McCall would come after him again. He'd come with more force and approach with more stealth. He would be unpredictable as to time and place, so that his intended victim would always be left wondering, always looking over his shoulder. If Ray let himself get into that mentality, he would die. Even if McCall didn't get him then, someone else would.

To survive, he had to be hard, unflinching. He had to sweep the fear out of his mind to plan and act with unerring precision—he had to let the Bookman take over. The man he had found deep within himself, the man that had surfaced when he repressed all his tender feelings, all his empathy, the man he had become when he was undercover, friendless, desperately trying to obliterate his feelings for Fraser, that was the Bookman. And he was a dangerous companion. While Ray wanted security, the Bookman wanted vengeance.

He kept hearing McCall's gloating voice in his head: "Look at him, he's scared." The Bookman had been reduced to trembling before a punk who had gotten the upper hand on him. He couldn't let this pass.

To protect himself, Langoustini had to do something definitive, something that would dispose of McCall and would show everyone else that the Bookman was real, that he was the Bookman, that he could not be cowed.

He needed a weapon, and he needed it so fast that there was no time to make it with what lay to hand. He'd have to get it from another prisoner, which wouldn't be easy. Right now, he knew as surely as he knew anything that the tide had turned

against him out there. McCall had maybe spent one or two nights in solitary, and now he was out in the cellblock badmouthing the Bookman. The whole cellblock was probably calling him Vecchio, preparing violence for slights he had done them, getting ready to torment and then destroy the cop in their midst. The Bookman was the master of intimidation, but many of the guys he had a history with would defy him now, thinking there was safety in numbers. But there was one particular man he thought he could get to, one coward Langoustini could force into submission: Carlo, the man with the pretty wife. Carlo had been in Chicago Central long enough to have some contacts. Langoustini figured Carlo could beg, borrow or steal a weapon if he really had to. The Bookman would bring the whole force of his reputation to bear on one little man with a weakness. He planned it out carefully.

Wednesday the doc stopped the morphine shots, and Ray suddenly felt as if his body was coming back under his control. The attack had taken its toll, though. He walked around his cell and did some stretches, then tried a few pushups. His muscles were bruised and stiff, responding sluggishly and under protest to his commands. His head still ached steadily, although not as badly. The ribs were much better, only slightly tender to the touch, and the doc had taped them up for him. Somehow, he had to give the impression that he was stronger than ever, and that challenging him to his face would be a bad idea. He knew the dogs would sneak up on him, sniping at him in packs, snapping at his heels. He'd have to choose his moment and make an example of an individual to give the others pause. He'd have to have his wits about him.

He spent Thursday resting, eating as much as they gave him, stretching and testing his muscles without forcing them too far. Friday morning after breakfast, a week after his attack, the doctor released him back into the

general prison population.

Fraser rearranged his shoulders in the woolen blazer for perhaps the twentieth time in an hour. The suit was a hand-me-down from Lieutenant Welsh's younger, football-playing days, and so the jacket was only an approximate fit, and the pants were wide in the seat and too short. Fraser had taken them down to the limit, but the mark from the old hem still showed, despite having been ironed. Fraser hoped he didn't look quite as ungainly as he felt in this outfit. He doubted anyone would believe his masquerade. When he thought about it now, he realized the idea was ridiculous. He wondered what on earth Ray would think when it was announced to him that Armando Langoustini's stockbroker was waiting to see him.

Ray Vecchio had once told him that the secret to a successful undercover operation was one-quarter appearance and three-quarters attitude. If that were so, Fraser felt that he was starting off at least fifty percent down. Ray had also told him that most people just see what they're looking for, which gave Fraser the slim hope that he could slip through without being asked for identification as long as he didn't seem troublesome in any way.

At the outer gate he explained who he was and allowed himself to be searched. They found nothing incriminating, of course. Welsh had convinced Fraser to carry a wallet to avoid suspicion. What worried Fraser was that there was nothing in it.

After going through three checkpoints, Fraser was surprised to find himself admitted to the visiting room. A guard directed him to the only unoccupied booth. He sat, hands folded, waiting for Ray, trying to preserve an outer calm while his heart pounded wildly. At least now he knew that Ray was alive, that he was capa-

ble of walking into the visitors room. Fraser suddenly wondered if he had overreacted to what he had heard, or if he had been deliberately misled by the midnight caller. And then Ray came through the door on the other side of the glass.

Fraser saw Ray before Ray saw him. With a clench of adrenaline, he realized now that, while he'd understood in theory the extent of Ray's injuries, he hadn't been prepared to see Ray like this. Somehow his friend's body had become thinner, his expression harder. His eyes were large and wary, and one of them was badly blackened. As Ray approached, Fraser could see that the line of his jaw was swollen, his face and hands bruised and cut. They had loaded him with as many chains as they could fit on one thin man. His hands were confined close to the chain around his waist, and he wore a tight collar from which all the chains hung, crisscrossing his chest and hanging down to his closely manacled ankles.

What had they done to him? What had they done to Ray? Fraser watched, horrified, unable to look away. A jolt of anger pierced his chest. He wanted to protest, to call attention to this terrible injustice, to the pain Ray must be feeling. But to protect Ray he had to be still. He had to wait. His breath came short, and he suddenly had no idea what he could possibly say to his friend, his ex-partner, the man he cared about more than anyone else.

A step from the chair, Ray looked down, and Fraser realized that Ray's suffering had taken so much concentration that he hadn't even thought to find out who his mysterious visitor was. In Ray's eyes, Fraser read disbelief, then shame and anger. With difficulty, Ray turned and started out of the room. Fraser stood, his heart constricting in his chest. Ray had hardly even seemed to know him. His eyes had been hard, and Fraser had seen a wildness, a cold fury, that he had never seen in Ray before.

"Mr. Langoustini, wait," he called

through the glass.

Ray made a truncated gesture of dismissal with one manacled hand. "I don't want to talk to that guy," he said. "My portfolio ate shit last year. Tell him I'm getting a new broker."

Belatedly, Fraser realized with dismay that his visit had been a horrible failure. Rather than helping Ray, Fraser had shamed him. Ray didn't want to be seen that way, and Fraser couldn't blame him.

Ray sat on the cot in his cell and closed his eyes. Fraser's visit had shaken him up good. Now he had to forget about it, shove it to the back of his mind with all the other things that made him vulnerable. Jesus, Benny couldn't keep his hands off anything. It served him right that he'd gotten an eyeful. No, it didn't. What the hell was Ray thinking? He didn't want Fraser hurt, but at the moment, his concern was a liability.

If you want to survive, forget him, Ray thought. And somehow, with a facility that would have frightened him if he'd had the energy to think about it, he did.

Lunch was the first time he had to be in a crowd, and he stayed at the fringes, keeping alert, but greeting guys he knew and making sure to keep his head high, his expression aloof and arrogant. The guys he spoke to answered him with respect, even if some of them did look down and mumble. It surprised him that he got through the meal without any trouble. But Ray hadn't seen himself lately.

Thin to begin with, he had become gaunt, his features sharp. His eyes flashed with anger and his mouth, although still bruised, was curled into a scornful smile. He looked as fierce and watchful as a beast of prey. The story of what he had done to

McCall's companions, turning their own weapons against them, was fast becoming a legend. Wanting to have it both ways, McCall tried to capitalize on the fact that he had knocked Langoustini out, while still insisting that Langoustini was Vecchio. As a known coward, McCall's boasts didn't command all that much respect. Ironically, the fact that he hadn't taken any blows worked against him, too, by showing that he'd been too afraid to go after the Bookman himself. So Ray enjoyed a brief reprieve from harassment, and that allowed him to get his hands on Carlo.

During recreation, Ray had often seen Carlo eyeing him warily from a distance, and he had always been careful to look right through him. Now it paid off.

"Carlo," he said softly. The man before him jumped and turned quickly. Taking him by the elbow, Ray steered him into a corner. Apparently Carlo had been one of the Bookman's associates a long time ago in Chicago. He didn't seem to have any more problems recognizing his old boss.

"Hey, Armando, what do you want from me?" Carlo was shaking and his arm was tense under Ray's grasp. "I ain't got nothing you want, man."

"Shut up," Ray said roughly. "You ain't got it, but you can get it."

"What?" Carlo gaped at him.

"A knife."

"I can't get no knife in prison."

Ray pulled him closer and spoke right into his face. "If you can't get me a knife in 24 hours, I'll tell you what's gonna happen. You remember what I said to you before? I'm gonna send some guys around to visit Laney. She might not like their manners."

Carlo was shaking so hard, he was almost sobbing. "She's pregnant, man. You gotta leave her alone."

Ray shook his arm. "You selfish little shit. Your wife's pregnant and you won't help

her out?"

Miserably, Carlo hung his head. "Okay, man, okay. But it's gonna be homemade. It's not gonna be no fancy hunting knife."

Ray laughed. "Oh, it'll be a hunting knife, but it can be homemade. Just make sure it's sharp. And don't say nothing to nobody."

"If I do this, you'll leave her alone, right?"

Ray shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "Yeah, sure, I ain't got no beef with the wife of a guy who helps me out." He looked at the clock over the prison yard. "You got till 4:30 tomorrow. I threw in the extra half hour because I'm a nice guy." Pushing Carlo's elbow back at him, Ray stalked off to the other side of the yard feeling pretty good. If the Bookman had played basketball, he might even have shot a few hoops.

Saturday morning he saw the first sign of trouble.

He was walking through the cafeteria to get in line—always a risky situation because of the crowd and the close quarters, but he had to eat.

"Hey, Vecchio," came a voice close to him. He didn't hesitate but kept on going. "Hey, Vecchio!" A hand fell on his shoulder. "I'm talking to you."

Ray almost laughed. Being called "Vecchio" by a man he didn't know suddenly struck him as funny. "Vecchio" meant "old man" in Italian, something the other Italian-American kids in grammar school had never let him forget.

"*Va fanculo!* Go fuck yourself," Ray said viciously, shaking him off. "Who are you calling an old man?"

The guy was young, maybe 22, with prison muscles from daily workouts. Putting a hand on his chest, Ray shoved

him away. It wouldn't do to tolerate familiarities.

"Hey, don't get steamed. I heard that was your name," the youngster said, backing off. "That guy over there told me to talk to you." Ray looked over and saw McCall grinning at him. Just a reminder. "I don't know what you're talking about anyway. What language is that?"

"Polish," Ray snarled. "Do you always do what some asshole tells you to do? Ain't you afraid you'll get yourself killed one of these days?"

The guy didn't like being threatened. "Not by you," he said sullenly, narrowing his eyes.

Sporting a barracuda smile, Ray looked him in the face. "You keep hanging around McCall, it could happen," he said.

Ray's phone call fell at 5:00. He'd seen no sign of Carlo and he was sorely disappointed. Ordering the hit on Carlo's wife wasn't going to feel half as good as having that shiv in his hand when things got tough. Starting to dial, Ray heard a voice calling him desperately.

"Amando! Armando!" It was Carlo.

"Over here," he yelled. Carlo skidded to a halt in front of him. "You get it?"

"Yeah." The young man could hardly breathe from running up the stairs. He eased himself up next to Ray and pushed a long, thin package at him. It was something wrapped in duct tape. Ray stuffed it quickly into his shirt.

"It's good?"

"Oh, yeah." Looking down at the phone in Ray's hand, Carlo's eyes widened. "Armando, you didn't make the call, did you?"

Ray shrugged. "I have other business to transact, Carlo. Not everything's about you."

But as Carlo drifted away, Ray realized that he had been about to do it. He had been dialing the number, thinking about a whole list of things to ask his lieutenant, and the hit was

one of them.

Jesus. What was he becoming? Who the hell was he?

"You gonna use that phone, or you just gonna stand there?"

Ray snapped back to the moment. "Keep your shirt on," he growled, and dialed the number.

Monte picked up after two. "Hey, Boss, they're spreading rumors that you're dead again," he said nervously.

Cold anger filled Langoustini's chest. He was sick of hearing that. It was McCall's fault people were talking about him that way. "Some punk and his pals caught me in a tight spot. I spent time in solitary for roughing them up. Don't sweat it, he's gonna pay."

"I bet, I bet, Boss," Monte said excitedly. "I knew they couldn't keep you down. I figured—"

"Shut up, already! What the hell's the matter with you?" Langoustini asked, irritated. "I ain't got much time. Tell me about the deal."

"That's what I'm worried about, Boss. You won't like it. There ain't no deal."

"What are you talking about? Charlie said—"

"Most of what Charlie gave us was nothing but a bunch of bullshit. There's some guys named Liberty's Army, and they're looking for firepower. Charlie contacted them last week and told them you were gonna broker the deal. While you were in the hole, they checked the deal out, and it's bogus. Charlie ain't got the product."

"What the hell?" Langoustini said softly. "I gotta find Charlie and ask him what's up."

"That's the thing, Boss. I tried to call Charlie yesterday. He ain't there no more."

"Wait a second." Langoustini looked down the line for the phone and picked someone out. "Hey, Gonzalez, you seen

Charlie?"

"Nah, Charlie got transferred while you was in stir," the guy said, grinning to have been asked a question by the Bookman. "He ain't around no more. He went back to Joliet."

Langoustini turned back to the phone. "Look, Monte, forget about it. Charlie bunked. If Liberty's Army wants some stuff we have, sell it to them. Give them anything they want, and jack up the price. If they were in the market for the big stuff, you know they've got *molto denaro*."

"Now you're talking, Boss. That other thing—you know—it just ain't our thing."

"I'll call you tomorrow." Ray hung up. Charlie had hooked him with a phony deal. Had he also hooked the Bureau, or was this a test? Ray started to smell a rat. Had the Bureau cut him loose? He was alone in here, without a purpose. Who knew what was true and what wasn't? Were they even still planning to break him out?

He walked down the phone line looking proud and aloof, but inside his mind was spinning from question to question, trying to figure things out. He didn't even have to try to act like the Bookman anymore. It came naturally now, just like in Vegas. He was inside Langoustini's skin—it was like a shell he pulled around himself, a position of strength, a place where there was no love, no empathy, just cold calculation and single-minded self interest. His shock at realizing he had almost ordered the hit on Carlo's wife was starting to fade. He didn't have time to think about it any more than he had time to think about Fraser. He had to be strong for whatever was coming from McCall, from the Feds, or the guards or any unknown enemy. All he knew and all he wanted to know was that he was the Bookman and his purpose was survival.

Carson sighed and swiveled his chair, laying his hands flat on the desk. "You're wrong, Dulles. We have to think seriously

about damage control."

"Why, because Vecchio's Mountie friend went poking around?" The smaller man leaned back in his chair and smiled his feral smile. "Fuck damage control. It's a short-term mission."

Carson looked at him. "Is it?"

"Isn't it?"

Carson picked up a stray pencil and replaced it in his desk drawer. "Not if we can get the Bookman back in Vegas. But we'll never be able to do that if too much sensitive information gets around. There are too many people in the know. First Vecchio insisted on that damn lawyer, and now the Mountie—"

"The lawyer was your idea when Vecchio first went to Vegas," Dulles said meanly. He wasn't quite so subservient when no one else was around.

"Yeah, but he got too controlling. He started acting like he needed to know the plan." Carson shook his head. "The really big problem is that Vecchio doesn't trust us."

Dulles snorted. "Listen to you. Should he?"

Carson looked annoyed. "We're trying to accomplish our mission. If that means double-crossing a two-bit cop like Vecchio, then so be it."

There was a silence. "Maybe we should pull him," said Dulles.

"Why? The Bookman's network responded just like it should have. He asked them to make a deal and they went out and did what he said, just like that."

"Yeah, and then there was no deal. What the hell are they going to think of that? It's suspicious. Charlie's an asshole. I told you not to use him."

"It would never have happened if you hadn't overlooked McCall. How the hell did you end up leaving him in the same cellblock? Vecchio made the bust and testified at his trial, for christssake. If

everything had happened fast enough Charlie would have made the deal and we would finally have gotten that damn right-wing group. As it was, Charlie's lousy lawyer insisted he was in danger after Vecchio got hit and had him sent back to Joliet. If that doesn't look bad, I don't know what does."

"Pull him," Dulles said again.

"No," said Carson, slapping his palms down on the desk for emphasis. "Look—our first objective was to find out if the Bookman's network is still viable. It is. Next, we want to reestablish Vecchio as the Bookman and get him back to Vegas."

"Which he won't go for."

Carson sighed. "How do you know? He was into it last time, remember? If he hadn't gotten blown, he would have stayed there as long as we wanted. Two weeks later he was still so deep in character it was hard to debrief him. Something about Langoustini gets to him. Look, even with all the stuff that's happened to him in there he's still calling his Vegas lieutenant and saying all the right things. He's had a fight or two, but he's holding his own. Let's see what happens. Maybe he can tough it out."

Dulles shrugged. "McCall nearly killed him and I'm sure he'll try it again. Besides, he's telling everyone Langoustini is Vecchio. At least let's move McCall out to give Ray some space."

"No, don't you see?" Carson shook his head in frustration. "If we move McCall out, it looks like Langoustini has inside help. Then everyone goes on believing McCall. But if Langoustini takes care of it himself... Well, then everyone just sees McCall as a chump shooting off his mouth."

"I don't follow you," Dulles said, leaning forward with his elbows on the desk. "Just because Vecchio decks McCall or something, everyone's gonna believe he's Langoustini?"

"Not if he decks him. But if he does something worse..."

"Because a cop wouldn't do something worse."

"Yeah." Carson smiled.

"I don't buy it," Dulles said firmly. "Vecchio won't go there."

"Then we wait until he does, and if that makes you unhappy—" Carson shrugged. "Good thing I'm in charge."

Dulles laughed. "Are you sure? The lawyer is trying to reschedule the hearing for this week. That doesn't give Vecchio much time to go apeshit."

Carson was angry now. "If I have to make it happen, I will. I'll put more pressure on Vecchio. When McCall attacks him, he'll blow."

"How are you going to do that? I thought you didn't have any inside guys at Chicago Central."

Carson's smile was smug. "I said I didn't have anyone in the administration. I didn't mention I happen to know a guard or two."

"What are they going to do to the poor guy?" Dulles's cynical smile belied his concerned words.

"You know, pain, sleep deprivation. What do you think?" Shifting back in his chair, Carson laced his hands behind his head. "I know how Vecchio's mind works. I bet you anything I can get him to hurt McCall really bad. After that, he'll beg to go back to Vegas."

Dulles shook his head skeptically. "You want to put some money on that?"

Ray took precautions now, and he made plans. The shiv Carlo had gotten him was good. Made of a slat from a mattress frame, it had been honed razor sharp at one end. The metal had deformed as it got thinner, so the rippled metal would rip into flesh, not just slice. It was a terrifying and primitive weapon, one that could leave behind a swath of destruction with just one

thrust. Ray wondered how many furtive hours of labor it had taken to make, and what price Carlo had had to pay to get it from its owner.

To hold it, he constructed a sling from the ragged edge of his blanket and tied it with threads at his side under his left arm. If he moved the wrong way, or if the blanket came apart, he might slice himself. He had to be careful while he waited for trouble to come to him.

It was strange how disconnected he felt and yet how sharp his mind seemed to be. He was hyper-aware of every movement, every word spoken around him. He was an animal, surrounded by danger, focused on survival, and yet he wasn't afraid. Being the object of McCall's deadly hatred gave him a sort of buzz, turned on his senses as nothing ever had before. Rather than being intimidated, he was getting off on this game, and he was getting ready to turn the tables on his tormentor.

Monday morning Fraser stood with his hat in his hands while the secretary informed him exactly why Mr. Nelson could not see him then, or ever. He had decided to wear his hat and leather jacket since, strictly speaking, one could still wear the hat without currently being an officer of the R.C.M.P. in good standing, but it still served as a reminder that he had been, and would be one again. Apparently it hadn't helped.

Having exhausted his last argument, Fraser turned to go. He got out into the hall and almost to the staircase when he heard his name.

"Mr. Fraser?"

He turned and saw Penny coming after him. "I almost missed you," she said. "Why are you going this way? The elevator's at the other end."

"I was going to take the stairs."

She looked incredulous. "Twenty-four floors?"

"Yes." He stopped short of telling her

how he kept in shape by doing such things, and how he would never in any case have given himself any ease after trying and failing to help Ray. "Did you want to speak to me?"

She looked around. "Let's go somewhere private. There's an empty conference room." She produced a key and led him to the last door before the elevator. "We rent extra offices on this floor outside our complex. We don't use them very often."

The room was furnished with lush leather chairs and a long, oddly shaped table. There was a wet bar and a coffee maker, a sink and a dishwasher. Fraser stared. He had never gotten used to the American taste for opulence, especially in the face of all the poverty that one saw on a daily basis in Chicago.

Penny followed his eyes. "Nice, isn't it?"

"Yes," Fraser answered truthfully without adding the rest. She offered him a chair, and he sat, hating the smooth luxury of it. Every second that he spent in comfort seemed like an insult to his friend. "While we're sitting here, Ray is still in jail," Fraser said.

"Not for long," Penny said, smiling. "My father got the preliminary hearing rescheduled for Thursday."

"This week?"

"Yes."

"Four days from now." Fraser fingered the rim of his hat that was lying on the table. He felt uneasy. He didn't really trust these people and he wasn't accustomed to that feeling. "How are you planning to get him out? Isn't he supposed to go back to jail after the hearing?"

Penny looked at her hand, which was tapping lightly on the tabletop. "Yes," she said slowly. "Normally, that would be right." Fraser felt a cold spot of fear in his chest. She still hadn't looked him in the eyes. "But, you see, a procedural irregular-

ity in his arrest will be discovered at the hearing, and the charges will be dropped. He'll be free to go."

"He will?" Fraser looked at Penny steadily as he spoke. Her eyes were blank and she seemed to be concentrating on something just past his left ear.

"Yes. Does that alleviate your concerns?"

"Partly," Fraser said. "I'd feel better if I knew what you weren't telling me."

She looked at him angrily, finally meeting his eyes. "Nothing. I shouldn't have told you as much as I did. I thought you were concerned and I didn't want you to worry about him. Everything's going to be fine. Your friend will be released Thursday."

Fraser didn't often quote Shakespeare, but apt quotations sometimes sprang to mind. *The lady doth protest too much*, he thought. "That's good news," he said heartily.

"Yes," she said, watching him, "I thought you'd think so."

At that moment, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, Fraser decided to find out what time the preliminary hearing started. Having exhausted all his options, he didn't know what else to do except be at the hearing. The man on the phone was right. Somebody had to watch out for Ray. These people certainly weren't.

Penny watched the Mountie walk down the hall and enter the stairwell. His gait was so even, his back so straight. She could tell he didn't trust her, and that was fine. There was nothing he could do anyway. Maybe he believed her just enough to keep him out of their hair for the next few days until the plan had a chance to unfold. Her father had just been informed by the FBI that the mission had been such a success so far that Vecchio would be sent back to Las Vegas to take up his post as Langoustini again. By the time Fraser found out, it would be too late for him to interfere.

Ordinarily, she might have felt guilty

for keeping the friends apart, except that Vecchio had phoned her father that morning and told him in no uncertain terms to make sure the Mountie didn't try to see him again. At this point, it would be disastrous for Vecchio if Fraser were to visit the prison again and was recognized.

She looked back at the stairwell door and sighed, thinking of Fraser going down all those steps. There was something appealing about that man. Under different circumstances... But there was no use thinking about that.

Langoustini woke in darkness hearing voices.

Rising, he realized he could see a little. The door to his cell was open. He went through it cautiously. All the cells down the row were empty, their doors ajar. There were no guards, no prisoners. As he approached the yard, the voices got louder. Everyone but himself seemed to be outside.

The shiv was heavy against his ribs, the strings that held it in place biting into his flesh. He walked slowly towards the voices, and as he walked the light grew a little stronger.

He reached the steel doors and pushed them open. They swung outward silently to reveal a crowd of prisoners, their faces obscure in the gray light of early dawn. They were waiting for him.

There was a clear space in the center of the crowd, and McCall stood there, grinning his most taunting grin. Langoustini walked up to him and stopped. He no longer heard the voices that had drawn him here. Everything was perfectly silent.

"Your name is Ray Vecchio," McCall said accusingly.

Langoustini felt his face crease into a smile. "Ray Vecchio is dead," he said softly.

Reaching inside his jumpsuit,

Langoustini grabbed the shiv's handle and pulled it free, and with one smooth movement he buried it in McCall's gut before McCall even knew he had something in his hand. McCall thought he was being punched until Langoustini twisted it, and then horror bloomed on his face. Langoustini felt the black blood roil over his forearm and drip down. Its heady smell filled the air. With an effort, he pulled the shiv out and stepped back. McCall fell, his blood pooling on the concrete. Langoustini dropped the shiv in the middle of the yard and walked to the drinking fountain to wash his hands. The crowd parted around him like an ocean, an ocean of black blood that suddenly seemed to swirl around his ankles, then his knees, washing away everything in its path.

Ray woke in darkness hearing voices.

He was breathing hard, the last image of the dream still imprinted on his eyelids. Voices and footsteps echoed softly through the cellblock. Weapons check. Grabbing the shiv from under his mattress, he wedged it hard into the space between the leg of the cot and a bolt that stuck through from the other side. He had practiced this so many times in the middle of the night that he could do it by feel in a couple of seconds. He hoped it would hold if they turned the bed over.

They were just a couple of cells down, trying not to make much noise. He lay down and covered himself, pretending to be asleep.

Why had he had that dream? In it, he had been Langoustini. There was no trace of Ray Vecchio in the man who had coldly stuck a knife into McCall's belly.

Ray Vecchio is dead. That's what he had said to McCall. Was it true? Was the man who had been planning to do exactly that, to tear out McCall's insides with the sharpened end of a mattress stay, was that man still Ray Vecchio? Did he still have the right to call himself a cop?

Ray shivered under the blanket. He had

to admit that the thought of being at McCall's mercy again scared him shitless. He needed the shiv for protection, but maybe he didn't have to use it. He wouldn't strike first—he'd defend himself.

A key turned in his cell door and he woke with a start, pulling off the covers and standing up. Three guards he recognized came in shining flashlights in his face, while two more he couldn't see clearly stood outside with weapons ready.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked loudly. "I didn't order room service."

"Weapons check. Keep your voice down, smartass. You know the drill."

They cuffed his hands behind his back and made him stand with his legs spread. They took his socks off and opened his shirt, pulling it down over his shoulders to hang uselessly at his waist and bound wrists. A guard patted him down roughly, giving him a jolt in the balls with his nightstick that made Ray grunt and double over. When he fell to his knees they laughed. A guard kept a hand on the back of his neck to keep his head down. One of them pulled the mattress and blanket off the bed and felt them all over. Two men together picked up the bedframe and shook it. Ray closed his eyes. Nothing clanged to the floor.

When they were satisfied, they left everything as it was and walked out, leaving Ray on his knees, his hands still cuffed behind him.

"Hey," he said, "you didn't—"

"Eat shit, Langoustini," one of them said.

He managed to spread the mattress flat on the floor, and spent the night lying there freezing. He slept fitfully, a few minutes at a time. By morning his wrists were raw, his arms were numb and he was shaking from the cold. They had wanted to humiliate the Bookman, but he still had the shiv. By the time a guard freed Langoustini

from the cuffs so he could go to breakfast, Ray Vecchio had retreated to a corner of his mind.

When Langoustini saw his lawyer on Tuesday even more precautions than usual were taken. He was collared and cuffed, and the leads on his wrists were so short he had to put the phone down on the counter and pick it with his head and shoulder. When Nelson protested, one hand was released so Langoustini could hold the phone to his ear.

"Did something happen?" Nelson asked as soon as they were settled. Vecchio looked edgy, like a man who was stretched to his limit.

Langoustini shook his head. "Nah. They're just putting on the pressure. They figure they're gonna lose me soon if I'm acquitted. Did you get the suit from Monte?"

"It arrived yesterday."

"It's a year out of style, right?" Langoustini asked disparagingly.

Nelson smiled, enjoying the game. "It's a classic, sir. Dark gray, with a white shirt and a tasteful tie with diagonal stripes in gray and subdued fall colors."

Langoustini chuckled. "You sound like a fashion magazine instead of my attorney. I remember that tie. A lady bought it for me for being a frequent flyer." He raised his eyebrows suggestively. "So, what time you gonna pick me up in the limo?"

Nelson shook his head. "No limo, remember? You have to ride in the police van."

"Yeah, I was just kidding. I can't wait to get out of this place. They did a weapons search last night and screwed up my beauty sleep."

"Someone from the firm will be allowed to assist you while you dress. He'll arrive at nine. The hearing starts at ten-thirty." Nelson would be glad to be done with this charade. He feared for Vecchio's safety now more than ever.

"That's good. I don't wanna be hit when I'm shaving or something. Been there." He smiled, but his eyes remained cold.

"Mr. Langoustini, I have every confidence that our request for a dismissal will be granted by the court."

Langoustini grimaced and shook his head. "After a year in the can, now they're gonna dismiss the charges? Oh, man, I still think I should sue for damages. What do you say?"

"I can pursue that option if you wish," Nelson said non-committally. "Shall I make arrangements for your return to Las Vegas, assuming that everything goes well?"

Langoustini's eyes widened for a instant. "Yeah, sure. Get me a ticket and a cab or something. Then call Monte and tell him to send someone to pick me up at the airport."

Nelson nodded. "I'll take care of it, sir."

Looking ill at ease for the first time in the interview, Langoustini bent to scratch the side of his face with one finger. "So, you told my ex-stockbroker not to show up anymore?"

"It's taken care of," Nelson said crisply.

"I didn't expect to see him here," Langoustini said carefully, looking Nelson in the eyes. "He must have been worried. About my account, you know?"

"Yes," Nelson replied significantly. "He came to see me several times."

Langoustini shook his head and looked down at his hands. "He would," he said. "The guy don't take 'no' for an answer. Never did." He glanced up suddenly. "You got anything else, John?" Langoustini's face looked suddenly strained.

"No, sir. Is something wrong?"

"Nah. I got more important things to think about than my stockbroker." Rising, he put down the phone impatiently and turned away.

Not for the first time, Nelson wondered about the connection between

those two men as he walked through the prison's outer gates. On the one hand there was Vecchio, an undercover cop who was apparently willing to go to any lengths to complete his mission, and then there was Fraser, a Canadian Mountie—a very appealing young man who had obviously made quite an impression on Penny Nelson, even if she was acting the consummate professional and pretending he hadn't.

Nelson's inquiries about the Mountie hadn't yielded much except that Fraser was on suspension from the R.C.M.P., and that, as he had claimed, he actually was staying at Ray Vecchio's apartment. Apparently, the two were friends, but why was Fraser doing things like posing as Langoustini's stockbroker, a dangerous and lame-brained operation for which he apparently had no support from anyone? He wished he could ask Vecchio directly, because all he could glean from the detective was that he didn't want Fraser to visit the prison again—under the circumstances, a wise decision. Since that was all Nelson had to go on, he had decided to keep Fraser at arm's length, and even to mislead him about the FBI's plans for Vecchio. Somehow, it made him vaguely uncomfortable to be dishonest to such a seemingly straightforward young man. But, until he knew more, that was the course he had to follow.

Wednesday trouble finally found Ray.

A warm drizzle was falling, but Langoustini was in the exercise yard talking to some guys he knew. When he saw them look suddenly nervous, he turned and partly deflected the blow aimed from behind up at his heart. The Bookman's friends never warned him; he'd been betrayed.

He was cut, and he knew it, because he could feel the blood seeping down his side, but the blow hadn't struck home. The thick tape on his bruised ribs had probably saved his life.

Spinning, he lashed out and knocked

aside another blow from the knife in McCall's hand. It was a real knife, a sharp, deadly hunting knife—the kind you see in catalogues, the kind Carlo had said he couldn't get. The area around the combatants cleared into a tight circle. Soon the guards would come, and they'd have a hard time forcing their way through to where the action was. By that time, someone would probably be dead.

"C'mon, McCall," someone yelled. "Kill the fucking cop!"

Did it matter, at this moment, whether he was Vecchio or Langoustini? They hated him no matter who he was, and they wanted to see his blood. But he was going to disappoint them. This punk was going down, and he'd survive.

He didn't pull the shiv out yet because he wanted McCall to get too dependent on his advantage, wanted him to get cocky and careless because he was holding eight inches of sharpened steel. He was holding it awkwardly, but the superiority of the weapon itself forgave a lot of mistakes. McCall swept it horizontally across his belly, and Langoustini jumped back. When the knife had passed him, he kicked hard at McCall's leg and struck bone. McCall went down on one knee, and Langoustini jumped him, pushing him flat on the ground and with his knife hand above his head and banging it hard against the cement. McCall didn't let go. With his free hand, McCall poked at Langoustini's eyes, making him roll free. McCall pressed his advantage, swooping down towards Langoustini's chest with the knife in both hands.

Langoustini rolled away and jumped to his feet as the blade's tip skittered against the ground. Someone stuck out a foot to trip him up, and when he stumbled towards McCall the knife grazed his forearm. The skin stung as it opened up before his eyes. Blood welled out of the thin cut and

dripped down into his hand. Shoving McCall away, he pulled out the shiv and struck back, slicing a diagonal line up across McCall's chest. As the homemade blade caught on McCall's collarbone, it spun out of Langoustini's blood-slickened hand, tracing a silver arc and flying into the crowd. It was probably pocketed before it hit the ground.

Ray stood there panting, terrified, but McCall hadn't seen. The young punk was a physical coward, scared of his own blood. His face flushed and he grabbed at the wound. "How bad am I hurt?" he cried to the crowd.

"It's a scratch," yelled one guy. "Finish him, man. He's got nothing. He dropped his knife."

From the sidelines, a few guys started closing in, and Vecchio knew his hour had come. The usual code of honor, such as it was, didn't apply in the case of a cop. They were going to take hold of him and let McCall gut him like a flounder, and he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. His only chance was to act now, to make one desperate attempt to get the knife away from McCall. He leapt, shoving McCall backwards into the crowd, feeling the sharp blade nick his shoulder and face. Vecchio felt blows against his back as everyone closed in on him. He was weighed down with bodies, flat against McCall. His face slipped against McCall's chest, and he struggled to push away so he could strike. As he fought and groped for the knife, a viscous wetness was spreading over everything. Was it the rain, or was one of his wounds worse than he thought?

Something hard like rubber came into his hand and he took it up. It was the knife, and he lashed out at the guys who were holding him down, slicing through cloth and flesh and hearing cries of pain, feeling men kick and squirm to get away. Finally he stood clear, breathing hard, with the knife in his hand. His face was smeared red, his clothes were stained with blood mostly not his own. Both hands were slick and red to the elbows. A silent circle of men stood around him, staring.

McCall lay dead at his feet, his throat sliced through. The blood pooled around him, diluted by the rain, and ran into the drain in the center of the yard.

"Hey, Armando, you got him," came a nervous voice.

"Anyone else wanna play?" Langoustini asked fiercely.

There was silence, and then the running tramp of the guards.

As if a veil had lifted, Ray suddenly became conscious of himself standing there, reeking of blood like a sated predator. His body still tingled with violent energy and his labored breath seemed loud in the silent air. When he looked at McCall's mangled body, all the feelings he'd been repressing for weeks slammed into his gut with the force of a blow. Sick at heart, Ray tossed the knife down on the body and pushed his way into the crowd. The rain, coming down harder now, washed some of the blood off his hands and face.

Five or six men from the melee besides Ray had suffered minor cuts or had somehow gotten spattered with the victim's blood. The guards grabbed anyone who had blood on him for questioning. Ray figured someone would rat on him and he'd end up on trial for McCall's murder. There was no way to prove he didn't do it when he didn't know himself. This fucking nightmare would never end.

The cut on his forearm was still bleeding freely, so he ended up in the infirmary, sitting across from the doctor he had seen before and a guard holding a clipboard and a pen.

"So, Armando, I suppose you didn't see anything?" the guard asked tiredly. "Who had the weapon? What kind was it?" Apparently someone had summoned up the courage to steal the knife, which was good news for Ray.

He would have shrugged, but the doctor was giving him a shot of anesthetic. "It was kind of a free-for-all. I was standing next to that dead guy—what's his name?"

"McCall," the guard said cynically, "as if you didn't know."

Ray gestured with his good hand. "I don't know everybody. Not punks like that guy. He had a knife in his hand, and he went kinda nuts."

"How come he had it in for you if you didn't know him?"

Ray flinched as he felt the first stitch go in. The doctor glanced at him. "Do you want another shot?"

"He's fine," said the guard warningly.

"Hey, this isn't a Central American dictatorship," said the doctor. "I'm a doctor, not a torturer. Do you want another shot, Langoustini?"

"Nah, it's okay," Ray said. The pain helped him focus on keeping up his guard, on keeping the guilt and regret at bay. The guard repeated his question impatiently. "He didn't have it in for me as far as I know. I was just standing too close."

"You got more blood on you than anyone else and your back is cut."

"I was pushed on him."

The guard leaned in close. Ray felt queasy from his hot, unpleasant breath and the pain. "You sonofabitch, I heard about you. This guy hit you a couple weeks ago, beat the shit out of you. I think you just wanted to get back at him."

At the accusing words, Ray felt a sudden surge of adrenaline. "That's what I get for cooperating," Langoustini snarled. "I want my lawyer."

The guard rose. "When you finish with him, keep him here until I come back. Keep them all here."

When the stitches were in, Ray lay down on an infirmary cot and waited. His hands were cuffed together, his legs shackled. As the painkiller wore off, his right forearm

ached more and more, while the cut on his ribs stung where the doctor had painted it with antiseptic. The doctor was working on a couple of other men whom Ray himself might have cut when he was struggling to free himself from the pileup over McCall's body. Occasionally one of them glanced at him, and he wondered what they were thinking. Was it open season on him now? Would he live to make it to his hearing?

When the doctor went over to the other side of the room to get some more supplies, one of the men gestured at him furtively. Ray sat up, swinging his shackled feet clumsily to the floor.

"What?" he whispered. "You got something to say?"

"Mr. Langoustini," said the other man eagerly, "I never thought you was a cop. McCall was full of shit."

"That's right," Langoustini said smugly, "and look what happened to him." *People are sheep*, he thought, lying down again.

The guard with the clipboard walked back into the room with a pair of helpers. His posture was bad, his shirt was sweat-stained and he looked thoroughly frustrated. "All right," he said. "Get up, all of you." The four prisoners in the room slowly dragged themselves off their cots, accompanied by the sound of chains. Ray was a little too slow, so the helpers came over and took him by the arms to haul him upright. He let gravity drag him down without seeming to resist, and then hissed through his teeth when his stitches pulled.

"Hey, I need to call my lawyer," he said loudly.

The guard with the clipboard glared at him. "You ain't being accused of nothing, Langoustini. Unless you got a guilty conscience. You have something to tell me?"

Ray shook his head no.

The guard blew out his breath hard

in frustration. "I didn't think so. I talked to seventeen guys today, seventeen guys," he said, shaking his head, "and not one of them saw a goddamn thing. You're spending the night in solitary, all of you. It's the least I can do to pay you back for fucking up my evening."

Accompanied by several guards, they were herded in a group through the several locked doors and checkpoints between the regular cellblock and solitary. Ray noticed that the other inmates left a little extra space around him. No one bumped him ever so slightly without saying, "Excuse me, Mr. Langoustini." After a couple of weeks of being persona non grata as Ray Vecchio, he was Mr. Langoustini again, *il seniore Langoustini*.

"I couldn't get you your old room, Langoustini," the guard said sarcastically as he held the cell door open. "I'm sure you'll like this one just as much."

The joke was lost on Ray. He was just relieved to be alone. Sitting down awkwardly on the filthy mattress he resigned himself to another night in shackles. At least his hands were in front of him now. Thank god for small favors. Bowing his head, he dropped his face into his hands and let the feelings come.

At the small, high window, the light was dimming as the late June sun set, turning the wall golden and then orange. No one had seen anything. More to the point, no one was going to rat on him. As if that was all that mattered. Ray laughed softly to himself and shook his head. He wondered if anyone actually knew what had happened. At this point, the truth, if it existed, was lost. Ray had come out on top of the pack, and he felt like shit about it. The authorities would never be able to determine who had struck the fatal blow, but the question haunted Ray for a long sleepless night.

The day of the preliminary hearing dawned bright and hazy. It was going to be a

muggy day—the first hint of real Chicago summer.

Brad, Penny's young colleague from the law firm, showed up precisely at nine with Ray's suit. Two guards escorted him to the showers, and they all stood around outside as Ray showered, shaved and dressed. Although he'd been able to change out of his bloody jumpsuit the night before, when he'd had the stitches sewn into his right forearm, he hadn't been able to wash. Seeing the blood caked on his skin made him shudder. He watched it go down the drain and soaped up again for good measure.

As he came out, impeccably dressed, Brad did a double take. "You look good, Mr. Langoustini," he said amiably.

"Thanks," Ray answered curtly. He kept seeing McCall dead on the cement with the rain carrying his blood down the drain. He kept wondering if he'd killed him.

"Is everything okay, sir?" Brad asked, a little intimidated by Ray's expression.

"Yeah, kid, it's all good," Ray said, remembering that he had to play a part. "I'm getting out of here."

They cuffed him with his hands in front, but didn't put on the full body chains.

As he climbed into the van with Brad behind him, he froze. The guard waiting inside for them was Dulles.

"Hello, Ray," Dulles said when the doors closed.

"Hello, Dulles, you asshole," Ray said. "It's not bad enough that everyone figured out I was a cop because you overlooked a guy I put away. Now they're gonna know I talk to the fucking FBI. Thanks for your consideration."

"Nobody knows who I am," Dulles said, unruffled. "No one saw me, anyway."

"Like hell," Ray said sincerely. Brad and Dulles held on to the narrow bench as

the van went around a turn. Ray swore as he almost slid off. "I hate these goddamn cuffs!"

Brad extended a hand to steady him, but Dulles laughed. "I have a deal to offer you."

Ray hung his head and laughed disparagingly. "You guys never give up. Okay, listen to me, and read my lips. This is the original plan, right? We go to the hearing. There's a procedural glitch and I walk. I pretend I'm on my way back to Vegas, and you pretend to kill me—that's why my attorney brought me a bullet-proof vest with my suit—and the Bookman dies. And I disappear back to my life."

"More or less," Dulles said.

Ray looked at his shoes for a long second and took a deep breath before glaring up at Dulles. "Okay. You're gonna tell me what that means before I kill you, right?"

Dulles laughed nervously. "Come on, Ray, it isn't that bad. Here it is. Everything's the way we told you except that we don't pretend to kill you afterwards. You walk, and you go back to Vegas and take up your old—"

"You bastards," Ray said, his voice rising. "I told you that under no circumstances was I gonna do that."

"It's too good a chance to miss," Dulles said coaxingly. The van stopped for a moment and then went on.

"For who? Not for me. For me, the only chance I want is to get out of here. I've had enough of this guy. The Bookman is a murderer and he deserves to die." Ray said it so adamantly that Brad and Dulles stared at him, surprised. "I notice Carson is having you do his dirty work again, you poor sap. Why didn't he tell me himself?"

"He's setting up security at the courthouse," Dulles said, embarrassed.

"Yeah, so he can keep me from getting away?" Ray scoffed. He turned to Brad. "They can't make me do this. It's just a job, right?"

"Right," Brad said, trying to sound authoritative.

"See? And another thing. You set me up

with those nukes. There weren't any nukes. What the hell was that about?"

"Charlie got scared. His lawyer pulled him."

Ray turned to Brad again. "You see? They swore up and down that Charlie was for real, but he was a plant." He looked back at Dulles. "The things you guys don't tell me could fill a book." He tilted his head and looked sharply at Dulles. "Of course, if I were a suspicious man, I'd wonder if the whole purpose of this charade wasn't to get me primed up and back in touch with my network so I could pick up where I left off with Langoustini. In fact, the more I think about it..."

The van stopped and the motor went off.

"We're here already?" Ray asked doubtfully. "I'll get back to you later, Dulles. I'm not letting this go."

The back opened and Ray saw a sea of blue uniforms. It was his escort to the courtroom. He and Brad stepped out and were joined by John Nelson and Penny in their walk up the courthouse steps. The steps were jammed with reporters, shouting questions and pushing their cameras at his face. Langoustini ignored them, walking stony-faced beside his legal team. As they got to the top of the steps they were forced to stop. He glanced back down at the sea of people and saw a familiar form standing down at the curb.

"Benny," he whispered involuntarily. It was like being stabbed in the heart to see Fraser after all he'd been through, after all he'd done. How could he ever tell Fraser what had happened with McCall? How could he ever tell him that his hands had been steeped in blood?

"Something wrong, Mr. Langoustini?" Nelson asked.

"That old friend of mine is down there. The guy with the hat." Fraser stood at attention, his legs slightly apart, hands

clasped behind his back. Even without the glory of his red uniform he made the crowd look like a rabble. "You know, the stockbroker."

Nelson looked back. "When he came to see me he said he was worried about you. I wasn't sure if I could trust him."

"Oh, yeah," Ray said, averting his eyes from the familiar stance, the broad shoulders. A feeling like homesickness rose in his chest. "You can trust that guy."

The hearing was a blur. Ray stood when he was told and the rest of the time he sat with his cuffed hands resting on the desk. There were no cameras in the courtroom, but the place was crawling with reporters. Ray wondered for a moment why no one recognized him—he'd been on TV before. All the disguise he had was a little mustache and some bruises. But then he remembered that no one had really seen him anyway. They'd all been too busy looking at the Mountie. And who wouldn't rather look at the Mountie than him?

Was there any way in which the Mountie wasn't better than he? Ray knew Fraser could have gotten out of jail without killing anyone. He would have told an Inuit story, or given them a book to read or something, and it would have worked. He would have been kind or helpful to enough guys that someone would have stood up for him. But Ray had been the Bookman, and the Bookman held sway by fear and intimidation. Trapped in Langoustini, Ray hadn't been kind, he'd been violent and murderous. And now there was no way back.

If he hadn't left that night, if he'd blown off the assignment, he'd be with Benny. Benny had tried to kiss him. Until this moment he hadn't let himself think about it. *Benny had tried to kiss him.*

Ray felt a hundred years old. He couldn't face Fraser anymore, after what he'd

done. Carson had him now. He had to go to Vegas. He deserved to go.

Nelson told Ray to stand and he did.

"Case dismissed," said the judge.

The chains were removed right away. Ray found himself smiling and shaking Nelson's hand. People were pushing and shoving, trying to congratulate him, and reporters were asking him how he felt. Carson came up to his side.

"I heard you don't want to go," he said in Ray's ear.

"I'll go," said Ray.

"Really? I thought you said—"

"Get lost. I don't wanna be seen talking to you. I'll catch a cab to the airport."

Carson disappeared into the crowd, more than ready to quit while he was ahead.

"Everything's prepared for your departure, Mr. Langoustini, but are you sure it's wise?" John Nelson murmured into his ear.

Ray shrugged. "It may not be wise, but it's what I'm gonna do."

There was no more time for conversation as Ray and his lawyers were swept outside, into a crowd of reporters. He let Nelson do most of the talking, limiting himself to some bullshit about thanking them for believing in his innocence and his ordeal being over. The reporters drifted off as Nelson and his entourage surrounded Langoustini and indicated that the interview was finished. In any case, there really wasn't much left to say. Ray knew that they were referring to him on the news as a "boss from a prominent Mafia family." God, he had promised his mother not to do this again. She'd probably see him on TV tonight.

They stood on the courthouse portico, among the great stone columns.

"The firm's limo can take you to the airport, Mr. Langoustini," Nelson said, handing him a ticket and a roll of bills.

"Thanks, that would be great."

"Are you sure that you want—"

"Yeah. Thanks for everything, John. I'll give you a call. Come out there and see me in a month or two. Maybe I'll have something for you." Standing out here on the steps wearing a nice suit and holding a roll of bills, Ray started feeling pretty good. He was going back to that life of power and ease where everyone respected him. He wasn't going to think about his family, and he wasn't going to think about Fraser. They'd miss him, and that was too bad, but he had a job to do. This was his niche, and he fit into it better than he ever had anywhere else. No more guilt, no more anxiety. His path was clear.

John Nelson leaned in confidentially. "There's something you should know before you leave," he said urgently. "I have to say this quickly so they don't suspect I've told you, but I don't think everything's right with the family."

For a frightening moment, Ray thought he meant the Vecchios. He swallowed hard. "Why? What is it?"

"That right wing group that wanted what your friend Charlie had? They've been raided. They had a very large, very new shipment of weapons in their possession. It was on the news."

"The weapons that they bought from me?" Ray asked, incredulously. "They've been raided already? What the hell happened?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Nelson asked dryly.

"Carson couldn't wait. The bastard got greedy. He set me up. I was incognito in prison all that time and now my deals are going south—no one's gonna believe I'm the Bookman now."

"It would seem not."

"What can I do? I have to go back to Vegas. There's no cover story. No assassination

attempt."

Nelson shrugged. "Go to the airport and disappear," he whispered. Take a plane somewhere else and come back looking different."

"Jeez," Ray said, stunned. "I can't do that. I worked so hard to make this work, to keep Armando going. I've done too much. I've gotta balls it out."

"I really don't think that's wise," Nelson said.

Ray struggled to think straight as the fear in his chest subsided, to be gradually replaced by anger. Carson, that stupid bastard, was undermining his own operation. Did he want Langoustini alive or dead? Ray shook his head. It didn't matter what Carson wanted, what stupid mistakes he made. Ray wanted to be Armando Langoustini with a fierce desire that refused to be put aside. He *was* Langoustini. In his mind he pulled that shell back around himself. When he submerged himself in that role, it felt like walking into a flame. Everything fell away—Welsh, Kevin, the precinct, even his family, even Fraser. Every time he thought of them they dragged him back down into uncertainty. He was going back where he knew what was what.

Langoustini laughed. "Are you scared the *famiglia* could put out a hit on me, John?"

"Aren't they known for that sort of reaction?" Nelson asked tartly.

Langoustini considered. "Yeah, I was known for that. But Guido's different. He's scared of me, and he's really bad at making decisions. I know the guy. He hates being on top. He's probably wetting his pants waiting for me to come home."

Nelson shook his head. "You're talking about Langoustini's reputation, not yours."

Langoustini smiled slowly. "Oh, it's my reputation, all right. Because there ain't no other Armando Langoustini around

right now. We're one and the same. I'm going, and I'm staying this time until they pull me, John."

Nelson shook his head. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Langoustini chuckled. "Guido ain't so bright. I can handle him." He smoothed the bills out and put them in his pocket. "Hey, thanks for the tip, John." Shaking Nelson's hand, he turned and started down the steps by himself. He would walk straight to the limo without looking at Fraser. He walked with a lively step, keeping an arrogant expression on his face to make sure they all knew that he was untouchable, that he'd slipped through the system yet again.

When the first bullet caught him, he went straight down.

Fraser had turned away for a second to look down the street when he heard the report of the gun behind him. A woman screamed. When Fraser looked up the steps Ray had already crumpled and was trying to rise. The second shot flattened him. Blood spread across his white shirt.

Without thinking, Fraser took two steps towards Ray, but when he heard a car window whine he looked back in the direction of the sound. A black car with mirrored windows was leaving the curb precipitously. Cops and security guards from all directions were closing in on Ray. They picked up his limp body, and then he was so thickly surrounded by uniforms that Fraser couldn't see him anymore. Ray was being cared for. The best thing Fraser could do was to go after the shooter.

Fraser's heart was pumping hard, his boots slapping down on the asphalt. A taxi beeped at him indignantly. Fraser didn't look back. He could picture Ray lying there bleeding, his heart pumping his life's blood out onto the steps. Fraser couldn't have gone to him, called out his name, because Ray was playing a man he didn't even know. Where had

Ray been going when the bullets took him? He was heading so jauntily down the steps, towards the waiting limo.

Fraser guessed the answer. Ray was going back to Vegas. He had intended to disappear again.

The car was easy to follow for a while in the congestion of downtown, but soon it hit clearer streets. The driver was going as fast as he could without attracting too much attention. Little by little, he was leaving Fraser behind. He heard sirens start wailing behind him, but they faded as he ran. The police were going the wrong way. Why were they following the wrong car?

Fraser tried to call up more speed, but he was no match for a car going 45. His heart was straining; his lungs were starting to scream for relief. He either had to slow down now to a steady pace he could maintain, or he'd have to stop shortly. Hoping that the car would meet with an obstacle, he kept going as fast as he could.

But the streets were clear, and the car kept speeding along, bouncing occasionally on its soft suspension when it hit a pothole. Standing doubled over by the side of the road, gasping for breath, Fraser watched it out of sight. He had let Ray down. That old feeling of panic tightened his chest. He had failed. Behind him at the courthouse, Ray was hurt, maybe dead. Fraser had to go back.

As they carried Langoustini into the courthouse, the reporters who had scattered towards their vans and lunch came sprinting back. One lucky cameraman had gotten the shooting on tape, and his local station was now replaying it endlessly, interrupting soap operas of the kind Mrs. Vecchio liked to watch.

Penny Nelson had seen the whole thing, not that there had been much to see. A man dressed in a dark suit had opened

the window of a car parked at the curb and fired two shots. Both had hit Langoustini. The first had hit him in the center of the chest, throwing him back against the steps, and the second had struck him in the side. No one saw the car's license number, and there was some question about whether it was obscured.

As Penny glanced back to the street before entering the courthouse, she had seen a man in a leather jacket take off running down the street after the shooter's car. She wondered vaguely if it was Benton Fraser.

Ten cops, two security guards and three lawyers were squeezed into the office where they'd carried Vecchio and laid him on a couch. Trying to clear some space in the tiny office, Penny ordered half of the cops and guards outside while Brad and her father loosened Vecchio's tie and tried to revive him. The bulletproof vest had kept him from being killed instantly, but the bullets' impact had stunned him.

The door banged open and Carson came in, followed by Dulles, still dressed like a guard. They sent out all the rest of the officers and carefully locked the door.

Carson stood and stared at Ray. "Son of a bitch," he said, as if to himself.

"What's going on?" John Nelson stood up to confront him. His face was livid.

"Dad," Penny said nervously, "you have to calm down, all right?"

He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder but went on. "What I want to know is, where are the paramedics? And if this is your idea of a fake assassination—I don't know what's wrong with you FBI people. The man might be dead. He was on his way back to Las Vegas for god's sake. Why did you have to do this to him?"

Carson looked down at Langoustini's inert body and shook his head. "We didn't do this. It was for real."

"Who, then?" Nelson asked angrily.

"The Bookman's organization?"

Ray groaned and coughed. "Carson, is that you?" he said with difficulty. He wondered if he was having a heart attack.

"Yeah, Vecchio."

"You fuckup. You couldn't wait for that bust, could you? You were supposed to wait until the Bookman was dead. You could have waited until I was back in charge so I could do some damage control. Goddamn it!" He was breathing shallowly, both hands searching over his chest to find the source of the intense pressure that was keeping him from breathing.

"That wasn't it," Carson said sullenly.

"Oh, yeah? Then what? Guido's trying to whack me, you idiot." He coughed again and clawed at his side. "Jesus, tell me this isn't real blood. Get this thing off me." Brad opened Ray's shirt and ripped the velcro tabs off the vest underneath, revealing his taped ribs. Ray took an experimental breath. "Christ, my chest feels like it's been run over by a bulldozer. Are you sure there isn't a hole in me somewhere?"

"It could be worse," Carson muttered. "At least it didn't hit you in the head."

Ray sat up slowly and regarded his shirt with a pained expression. "Five-hundred-dollar, custom-tailored shirts. I'll never have one of these again." Moving gingerly, he took off his jacket and shirt and slipped out of the vest. "Fake blood doesn't congeal, does it?" he asked, wiping his fingers on his shirt with distaste. "Did you have to load the vest up with so much of it?" He shook his head at the stain on his pants.

"We wanted to make it look real when we killed you," Carson said.

"The family took care of that for you," Ray said bitterly, still panting between words, but too angry to stop

talking. "It's a damn good thing I was wearing the vest."

"I'm telling you, it wasn't Guido. It wasn't the family." Carson was showing the strain. His handsome face looked tense and tired.

Ray looked at him sharply. "Spit it out, Carson. Who's after me?"

"It was Gaetano Martinetti. Remember him? You rigged some deal with him last year and he did a little time. His brother got killed in the raid on his place."

Ray looked stricken. "Shit. He got off on appeal, and I didn't think he figured it out. Are you sure?" Ever since the day he'd punched Fraser out he'd forgotten all about the Velvet Glove and the big bust that was supposed to go down there. He'd even forgotten that Martinetti was in Chicago, although he'd identified the photo in Morrison's office.

"Yeah," Carson said. "He did it himself. He was right there in the car with the hit man. Look, Vecchio, we can still go through with this. The Bookman can be in the hospital for a while and then he can go to Vegas. We'll take care of Martinetti."

"Yeah," Ray smiled crookedly and shook his head. "For a minute I thought I was gonna miss my free trip back to Vegas." Relief washed through him. The family hadn't tried to kill him. He could still go back. He belonged there. It was all for the best.

"Did you catch him?" Penny asked.

Carson smiled knowingly. "We let him go. We can get him later. He has a big deal going down tonight, and—"

Ray coughed again and struggled to take a deep breath. "At the Velvet Glove."

Carson's smile disappeared. "How did you know?"

With great effort, Vecchio grinned. "Morrison over in Vice showed me some pictures. He wanted to make sure he had the right guy." Just saying those few words made him short of breath.

"Detective Vecchio is injured and we're

standing around talking," Nelson interrupted indignantly. "Where are the paramedics?"

"I didn't call them," Carson said. "I have some of our guys coming. They'll look like paramedics."

"You didn't call them?" Nelson was livid again, and Penny moved to his side. "The more I see of you federal agents, the less I respect I have for you. You use people like pawns in your insane schemes. How did a man like Ray Vecchio ever get mixed up with you?"

"John, take it easy. Sit down," Ray said with an effort.

"Detective Vecchio," Penny hazarded, "you're obviously in a lot of pain. Don't you think you should stop talking and lie down?"

Ray waved her off, although he knew she was right. He was short of breath and his head was spinning, making him nauseous. "He can't call the real paramedics because they'll expect a bullet wound, and I ain't got one." The experience of being shot suddenly rolled through his mind, and with it the picture of a familiar figure standing at attention by the curb. Vecchio faltered and dropped his head into his hands. "Hey, I don't feel so good."

"Are you passing out? Put your head down," Penny said with concern. She laid a hand on his arm. He was very pale, and the sight of his naked back, covered with welts and bruises from a savage beating, made Penny cringe. "He's freezing cold," she said, shocked. Picking up Ray's jacket, she draped it around his shoulders. "He needs medical attention now," she said angrily to Carson.

"Did anyone see where the Mountie went?" Ray asked, his voice muffled.

"I think I saw him," offered Penny. "He was running after the car of the man who shot you. I thought that was kind of—"

"Oh, no," Ray said. The pain in his

chest seemed to be invading his head. His face felt cold, and he felt sick to his stomach. Only when the world began to go dark did he realize he was passing out.

When Ray fainted, Carson and Brad eased him back onto the couch. He moaned, half-conscious.

"Fraser was chasing the car on foot?" Carson said. "I hope he didn't catch it."

"Why not?" Penny asked.

"Because we sent our guys after the wrong car on purpose. We can't take Martinetti until tonight or we'll miss the deal."

"So if Constable Fraser catches up with the car, he'll be on his own?" Penny asked indignantly. "He'll get killed. He doesn't even have a gun, does he?"

"No," Ray said, struggling to clear his head, "he doesn't have a gun."

Fraser was out there alone, looking for Ray's killer. Only Ray wasn't dead—he was getting ready to go back to Vegas. But what if Fraser died defending him, defending Armando Langoustini? Was Armando worth Fraser's life?

"Carson," Ray said urgently, "you've got to send someone after him."

"What the hell for?" Carson said angrily. "Don't expect me to baby-sit some clown who'd be stupid enough to pull a stunt like that. I'm not giving up two years of work because of an overgrown boy scout who wants to be a hero."

"So you'll just let him get killed?" John Nelson shouted. "Who the hell do you people think you are? I'm going to call my Congressman, and—"

"Dad," Penny said, laying a hand on his arm, "let's call the police. Maybe it's not too late."

"I can't let you do that," Carson said firmly. "The operation has to succeed. We can't stop it for one crazy individual who tries to make a citizen's arrest."

"It wouldn't be a citizen's arrest if you hadn't sent the police after the wrong car,"

Penny pointed out. "Fraser probably expected that they'd be right behind him."

Ray sat with his head in his hands, feeling dizzy as he listened to the verbal storm blustering around him. Only one thing made any sense to him, filling him with terror and remorse. *Fraser was out there by himself, facing Gaetano Martinetti.* Instead of standing at his side, Ray was hiding out here, planning to abandon him.

Something flipped inside of Ray, some switch that let all the feelings come pouring out. God, he'd been stupid. He had been about to give up all the love he had ever known so he could inhabit the skin of a dead man, to live that scary, inhuman—that cardboard existence that wasn't even his. Ray couldn't let Fraser or his family down like this. He had to stop playing this masquerade and face his life.

Ray managed to stand unsteadily facing the agent. The others fell silent, staring at him in surprise. "This is the end, Carson," he said deliberately. "I've had enough betrayals from you, enough bullshit."

"What do you want me to do, Ray?" Carson asked belligerently. "I've got an operation to run."

"Find the Mountie," Ray said emphatically. "Make sure he's okay, and that he knows I'm alive."

"Come on, Ray, I can't tell him anything," Carson said, holding out his hands. "I can't blow your cover now that you're going back to Vegas. He'll see it on the news tonight."

Ray smiled slowly as cold anger welled up in his chest. He was slipping easily back into the role he had played for so long, becoming the man who got his way through intimidation. "But that's where you're wrong, Carson. You see, I'm not going to Vegas. I'm fucking your whole operation right up the ass. We're going back to Plan A—I'm gonna die right here in

this office."

"But, Ray—"

"But, Ray what?" Langoustini asked viciously. They were nose to nose, facing off. The pain and exhaustion Ray had felt moments before were gone, leaving a violent euphoria in their wake. He was getting off on this confrontation and on the fear in Carson's eyes. The Bookman was back; Ray could feel him speaking through his face as if it were a mask.

"You don't have to do this," Carson said coaxingly. "We can deal with it. I'll send someone after the Mountie and we'll take you to the hospital. Martinetti is no one. By tonight he'll be toast. Don't let him kill the Bookman."

"Martinetti's not killing the Bookman. It's me. I'm killing him," Ray said. The euphoria had faded, but Ray knew that the Bookman had been in the room. Glancing around at the others, he saw in their eyes that they had seen it, too. Shame and despair filled him. Even as he was saying the words that rang the Bookman's death knell, he felt Armando lurking inside him. With a sudden stab of fear, Ray wondered if Armando Langoustini would always own part of his soul. He deserved to go back to Vegas, but he couldn't abandon Fraser.

Swaying a little on his feet, Ray took hold of Carson's lapel with his left hand to stay upright, while he jabbed his right index finger into Carson's face to punctuate his words. "Do what I said. Tell the press I'm dead. Put something in a ziplock bag and take it to the morgue. Cremate it before you give it to the *famiglia*. Let me hide out somewhere, and in a couple of days I'll go home. I ain't working for the Feds no more. I'm done."

Detaching Ray's hands from his clothing, Carson pushed him away. Losing his balance, Ray sat heavily and held his head. "I've been looking at this all wrong," he said. "I'm not the only one affected by this. I've got family and friends. If you got my friend killed, Carson, I'll kill you."

"There's no use making threats against Federal personnel, Ray," Dulles said warningly.

"That carries a heavy penalty."

"Blow it out your shorts," Ray said faintly.

Carson laughed acidly. "I thought the Bookman was dead."

"He is. Make the call. Now." Ray looked up at him for a second and regretted it. He hung his head and squeezed the bridge of his nose between a thumb and forefinger until the world stopped spinning. "Find the Mountie, Carson. Let me know he's okay. Of course, if I know him, he's probably bringing Martinetti in on a string."

Everyone watched as Carson picked up his cell phone and made the calls. Penny stared at the stitches on Vecchio's forearm and wondered how a man like the detective had ever put himself into the hands of a couple of liars like Carson and Dulles, or why he had been willing to suffer as much as he obviously had for their sake. No one said another word until the guys from the FBI morgue arrived.

The body bag had a dummy in it that was duly taken to a locked drawer in the FBI morgue and labeled "Armando Langoustini." Ray refused to leave until he heard that someone had seen Fraser, alive and well, walking through the crowd. Then he went out in a catering truck, hidden in the linen.

It was cramped and dark in the truck, and the linen smelled like old cafeteria food—shit on a shingle, or whatever they served at banquets nowadays. The large hamper he was hiding in swayed on its wheels. The smell and the motion and the pain in his chest were making Ray sick. He hoped they were almost there. He didn't want to pass out again and suffocate in a sack of dirty linen.

That would really be an ironic fate. From the king of Las Vegas to a scared little rat hiding in the FBI's dirty laundry. How the mighty had fallen.

Ray pushed aside a tablecloth and took a breath of air. It was laced with truck exhaust but it didn't smell quite as bad as the remains of someone's lunch. He rubbed his hands over his face. He still didn't feel right in the head from all he'd been through. He felt as if he'd been beaten up again, and his chest ached dully, with sharp pains punctuating any sudden movement.

He felt like an idiot.

He'd been pretending he could go on without anybody, without his family, his friends, his colleagues. He'd figured he didn't need any of them because he had power in his hands. Yeah, the power of a dead man, and his borrowed reputation. Somehow he had forgotten the misery—the sheer loneliness—of the Bookman's existence. Life without freedom, without his family, without Fraser. He had been about to trade Chicago Central for another kind of prison, a surer, more permanent kind, the kind you never walked out of alive. And if the Bookman was a prisoner of his own web of power, how much more a prisoner was his impersonator?

Ray had scared himself. It was so easy for him to cut off his feelings, to resort to the Bookman inside him, and he'd been doing that since before he ever heard of the Iguana family. The Bookman had just put a name to it. Ray thought he'd already been that scary guy for a long, long time.

Fraser walked back to the courthouse slowly, trying to stay upright despite the stitch in his side. He should have been able to apprehend those men. Of all the times to be caught unprepared and to perform inadequately, it had to be when Ray was shot. Fraser wondered perhaps if he had been paying more attention beforehand whether he could have

prevented the shooting from taking place. His side ached terribly. Despite his self-recriminations, he felt emotionally numb. Perhaps the physical exertion had drained him past the point of being able to feel. He had to remember that the years were going to take their toll, even on him. Maybe he should start to work out. He didn't get as much exercise here as he had in the north.

As he walked the last half-block, he realized that he'd been away from the scene for nearly an hour. Things would probably be resolved, but maybe he could at least find out where they'd taken Ray.

What he didn't expect was the coroner's truck and the black plastic bundle that was going into it. Careful not to push anyone, he made his way to the front of the crowd.

"Excuse me, sir," he asked a reporter standing just in front of the police lines. "Can you tell me who the deceased is?"

"Yeah, that's Armando Langoustini. The Mafia boss, you know?"

"He's dead?"

"Yep. Somebody shot him. They're still at large."

Without a word, Fraser turned and made his way to the edge of the crowd. The pain from his side seemed to seep into his chest so that it hurt to take a breath. He walked for blocks without realizing where he had gone, his mind a blank, his feelings numb. It was hours later before he realized he had forgotten to say thank you.

When Fraser reached the Vecchio home, bearing his bad news, the house was already filled with wailing and tears. Ma Vecchio was in the kitchen holding a large, laced-trimmed handkerchief and blotting at the tears that streamed steadily from her eyes. Her sorrowful face had a kind of dignity that Fraser had seen in Inuit women who had lost a child or a spouse. An

assortment of drinks sat on the table in front of her—brandy, tea, red wine—all of them untouched. In the living room Tony and the kids were watching television, staring wide-eyed as they saw replay after replay of Uncle Ray being shot. Maria and Frannie were going back and forth serving food and drinks to the assortment of cousins and friends sitting in various groups around the house.

When Fraser walked in, Frannie clung to him for a moment, and for once he felt as if she really needed his support. Glad to be able to offer something, he stood there until she let him go and smiled at him with reddened eyes.

"I knew you'd come," she said. "Is it true? I keep thinking it's some stunt and that he'll come walking in that door and say something nasty and I'll just want to smack his face."

"I think it's true, Francesca. I saw... I saw something," he said, realizing he didn't know if he'd actually seen Ray in that plastic bag. "I saw him get shot."

"You and fifty million other people," she said dryly, sniffing.

"I was there when it happened," he said. He gestured at the TV. "Do you suppose that it's healthy to let them watch that over and over? Don't you think it will upset them?"

Frannie walked over and changed the channel to cartoons and turned the volume way down. No one protested.

Fraser paid his respects to Ma and she cried over his hand, saying something in Italian he didn't understand very well about her boy's friend and she hoped he'd feel he was part of the family. He realized that he didn't feel that close to Ray's people anymore. He'd kept out of touch while Ray was away. The only one he really knew at all was Francesca.

And Ray. Could his mind hold that name yet without breaking down? Ray. He started to slip into the storm of memories that he'd been holding back. Ray. The first time Fraser had seen him, when he'd looked like just another antagonistic civil servant. The first time

he'd heard Ray's voice. "Who let the Mountie into the holding cell?" Ray's face, the moment he pushed Fraser out of the way of that bomb in Chinatown. The day he'd come to the cabin to tell Fraser about Gerard. When he'd come to the door and Victoria was there, oh, god. The way he looked when he took those bullets for Fraser, one year apart. And now he'd taken two more. Fraser and Ray had always been there for each other, to figure out the puzzle, to stop the bullet or defuse the bomb. Today Fraser had stood there like a block of wood while Ray died in front of him.

Frannie's hand touched his sleeve. "Benton, are you okay?"

He nodded, his face wet with tears. Somewhere in the background, under the TV noise, the telephone was ringing.

They took Ray to the Bureau and put him in a small room with a cot that was sometimes used by witnesses in transit. It felt like a hospital room to Ray, especially after an FBI doctor set him up on an IV drip and examined his injuries.

"You'll be fine in a few days," she said. "Your chest and ribs are badly bruised in several places, but mainly you're dehydrated."

"No kidding?" said Ray. "I must have forgotten to get my Perrier ration in jail."

She grinned. "Those stitches look a little tender, too. It might take a day or two for you to feel more comfortable." She taped his ribs again, remarking on the knife cut through the tape, which Ray didn't even try to explain.

Ray thought again about McCall, but he was starting to feel less upset about it. McCall had tried to kill him, and however McCall had died, Ray hadn't been the conscious agent of that death. He had been

fighting for his life. It might just as easily have been Ray who had gone down in that struggle. He didn't think he'd ever tell Fraser how it felt to stand up out of the chaos of that fight, covered in blood, holding the crowd at bay. That was Armando's finest hour. He had seen his enemy lying dead at his feet, and he'd felt like the king of the world, just like in his dream. Long live Armando. Armando was dead.

Carson and Dulles kept hanging around to the point that Ray wondered if they felt guilty for catching him up in their fiasco. He was a little nervous about Martinetti, and about Guido finding out who he really was, but overall he was glad it had happened this way.

Ray still couldn't believe he'd been about to do it again. He had been ready to leave Fraser and his family waiting for him while he escaped all his problems by climbing inside the skin of another man. If it hadn't been for Penny, he would have gone through with it. When she said she'd seen Fraser chasing that car, the picture that had come up in Ray's mind had stopped him cold. Fraser running, arms and legs pumping hard, with that intent look on his face. And Ray knew what he was thinking. Fraser thought he'd seen Ray die, and he was chasing down the killer. He didn't deserve to come back from that chase and find out that his friend had left him to be the Bookman.

Yeah, Ray had problems, but who didn't? That meant he had a life. He couldn't abandon Ma and Frannie and Fraser, or Welsh, or Diefenbaker, or even the pink and orange Riv. Life wasn't so simple and stark as it was in jail or at the Bookman's adobe in Vegas. There, he had to kill or be killed. Here, he had relationships, and suddenly he wanted to savor them in all their messy complexity. Ray would rather be here in muggy Chicago with glucose dripping into his veins than back in air-conditioned Vegas with a glass of buttermilk by his side.

"So, Carson," he said feeling a bit of

goodwill even towards his handlers, "you got a deck of cards? I could beat your asses at poker."

Carson shook his head. "No gambling around here. It's a rule."

"Hey, too bad. You got a TV?"

Dulles laughed. "Why, you want to see yourself die?"

Ray stared. "Say that again."

"What? I just asked if you want to see yourself die. They're playing it over and over on network TV."

Ray suddenly had a very bad feeling. "But you told the Mountie I was okay, right?" he asked uneasily.

Carson and Dulles exchanged glances. "Well, not exactly. We couldn't tell anyone. You just wanted to know that he was okay, right? And he is."

"Oh, my god, you mean to tell me that you knew I was filmed getting shot, and you didn't fucking tell me, and my family's been watching it the whole damn day? What's the matter with you guys? Get me a phone. Get me a phone!"

"Ray, you can't call your family. If it gets around that you were Langoustini—"

"Fuck it," Ray said, swinging his legs down off the bed. "I'll walk out of here right now and get a cab." He hoped Carson wouldn't point out he was naked except for his boxers.

Carson handed Ray his cell. Ray had to dial twice to get his fingers to obey him.

Frannie sighed as she rummaged through her purse. "Tony, get the phone!" she yelled over the noise of conversation. Tony didn't budge.

"I'll get it," said Fraser. Frannie handed Fraser a slightly crumpled kleenex. He wiped his face and stepped over to the phone. "Hello, Vecchio household."

Ray closed his eyes. "Benny," he said.

A long pause. "Ray."

"Benny, do they all think I'm dead?"

"Yes, Ray." It was the cold, detached Mountie voice. Ray wondered what he was thinking.

"I'm sorry, Fraser. Langoustini's dead, but I'm not. Tell all the cousins it was a case of mistaken identity—just a guy who looked like me. I'm over here at the Bureau and I'm fine."

"I saw you get shot, Ray."

"I had a bulletproof vest. The pain knocked me out, you know? Look, Benny, I'm sorry. Somebody just told me it was on TV. I didn't know."

"It's all right, Ray. Would you like to speak to your mother?"

"God, no, she'll probably have a heart attack. Frannie first, okay?"

"Just a minute, Ray."

When Fraser turned to Frannie, she looked at his face and put a hand to her mouth. "It's Ray," he said, hearing his own voice break. "He's all right."

"Oh, god!" she shrieked. "Oh, god!" And in a minute everyone in the household knew and was clamoring to talk to him.

Fraser stood a little way off, watching the chaos, trying to get a grip on his thoughts. Ray was hurt but alive. What Fraser had thought he'd seen had just been a way of getting rid of the Bookman so Ray could come home.

Fraser went over the memories he had just evoked, so full of pain a moment ago because he thought they would be the last. He and Ray would be together again as friends. There would be more memories of Ray, of all those things Ray did, both endearing and irritating: his understated affection for Dief, his refusal to follow the traffic laws, the affectionate way he looked at Fraser sometimes when he thought the Mountie didn't see. There was too much to remember, too much to put into

perspective.

"Benton!" Francesca's voice broke him out of his reverie. "Ray wants to talk to you again."

"Hello?" he said dully, feeling a little uncomfortable. The chatter all around him made it hard to hear.

"Benny, god, I thought they'd never let me go. Man, am I gonna pay for that." Ray chuckled. "Listen, Benny, I wanted to thank you for sticking it out, and for being there for my family."

"Ray, I really didn't do much."

"You were there, Benny." Overwhelmed by an unaccustomed wave of emotion, Fraser couldn't speak. Ray was all right. "Benny?"

"Yes?"

"Can you come over here tomorrow and bring some clothes? I have to get out of here. I want to go home."

"Yes, Ray. Should I tell your mother to expect you?"

"Not that home, Benny. My apartment, with you. Drive the car over here if you can. I'm still a little sore."

"Lieutenant Welsh had someone pick up the motorpool car. But there's the Riviera."

"Will it start?" Ray asked. "I'm really in no shape to work on it right now. Hang on a second, will you, Benny?" Through the half-covered mouthpiece, Fraser heard Ray arguing with someone at the other end. "Okay, Carson, I'll go tomorrow night. That's as long as I'm staying. You have all day tomorrow to debrief me." He got back on the phone. "Jeez, Carson doesn't want me to leave. Come tomorrow, any time after eight in the evening, okay? Don't forget to bring clothes. I've got nothing but my underwear and a pair of bloody suit pants. Everything else got shot."

After hanging up, Fraser managed to extricate himself and the car keys from the

Vecchios. He drove carefully back to Ray's apartment, suffering, as usual, the complaints and jibes of other drivers. He couldn't understand why a law-abiding driver like himself consistently received more complaints than a risk-taking, inconsiderate driver like Ray. He supposed it was a matter of self-confidence. If you showed a wild animal your fear, it was more likely to attack you than to let you go. Musing on this, he reached the safe haven of Ray's underground garage.

He pulled into the space and reached for the keys. As the engine noise subsided, Fraser wondered why the keys were still tinkling against each other until he looked at his hand. It was shaking badly, worse that he'd ever seen it.

Funny that he couldn't feel it happening. "It's all right," he told himself stoutly, "it's just a bit of shock."

But it had come too close to not being all right. He had thought Ray was dead for over an hour. Opening the car door, he lowered his head to his knees and kept it there until he felt well enough to walk to the elevator. Perhaps that run had taken more of a toll than he had thought.

Or perhaps the thought of Ray dead, gone from his life forever, was more than he could handle.

Ray spent the next day dozing between bouts of debriefing, during which he learned that the bust had gone down at the Velvet Glove as planned.

"I knew it wasn't the family," Ray said. "They're just as dumb as I thought. You handed me to them on a silver platter and they didn't do anything. What are you gonna do now that I'm not there, take down Guido?"

"That's classified," said Carson, tight lipped. "You wanted out of the game, you're out. You can't have it both ways."

Ray laughed. "Aw, fuck off, Carson," he said. "I see what you're trying to do. But forget

it. Langoustini is gone." Ray saw Dulles give Carson a smug little look. "Hey, did you guys have money riding on this, or what? No gambling at the Bureau, huh? You bet on whether I'd go back., didn't you?" No one spoke. "Assholes," Ray spat.

Fraser got up early and bought food and cleaned the already tidy apartment. The day stretched ahead of him, long and empty. He wanted the moment to come when he would be sitting in the Riv with Ray at his side. Until then, he really didn't want to think about anything. It was a relief to know that Ray was back and that he would never have to impersonate the Bookman again. Fraser had hated the feeling of helplessness, of being blocked at every turn from helping his friend. Now Ray had asked him for help and companionship, and that gave him a kind of joy that he could express by doing little things to make Ray's homecoming go more smoothly.

He got out Ray's toolbox and found the tire gauge so he could check the Riv's tires. As it turned out, all four tires were different, and all were at different levels. Pumping them up to some measure of equality (and fixing a couple of leaks) occupied him for several hours.

After that, he tried to read for a while, but he felt distracted by a host of confusing thoughts and feelings. Even if he exhausted himself completely, he would only be putting off the inevitable chore of sorting through them. With a sigh, he put down his book and asked Dief if he'd like to go for a very long walk around the edge of the lake. As usual, Dief would have preferred a shorter walk with food at the end of it, but in the interest of getting out of the apartment, he finally acquiesced.

Down by the lake, lots of people were out in the warm weather walking

their dogs or just enjoying the heat and sunshine. Fraser liked to watch them, but he felt a bit crowded. People always stared at him, and when he was in a normal state of mind he accepted it. He remembered complaining about it once to Ray Kowalski, who had retorted, "Yeah, big deal, Fraser. Sorry, but I can't relate. People stare at you because you're so fucking gorgeous. I should have that problem."

But Ray—neither Ray—didn't understand. It was hard to be in a crowd with confusing thoughts when you were afraid someone might approach you any second for a conversation, a favor, a come-on. Fraser was always glad to help when help was needed, but there were times when he grew tired of being the object of idle curiosity. He'd rather be alone when his thoughts were in such turmoil.

He tipped his hat and stepped around a pair of young women who were staring at him open-mouthed. He thought they were going to follow him, but after a few yards they turned aside and sat on a bench, giggling. He breathed out sharply in relief, glad that they hadn't tried the old trick of getting his attention by petting Diefenbaker. He hated to be rude, but, honestly, sometimes he knew the wolf allowed it on purpose just to see what he'd do. Right now, Dief seemed to be staying close by his side. Sometimes he picked up how Fraser felt and actually respected it. Perhaps that was why they had been friends all these years.

Fraser looked out over the lake. The sparkling sunlight on the calm water dazzled his eyes until he had to look away.

In all his preoccupation with Ray Vecchio's safety, Fraser had managed to avoid thinking about Ray Kowalski. As he pictured his former partner, a pang of guilt assaulted him, guilt and regret. His explorations with Ray Kowalski had been the fulfillment of friendship, an adventure that had run its course. Had there been no Ray Vecchio, he would have been tempted to try to make their adventure last a lifetime. Kowalski had depended on Fraser to know who he was, and

after Ray Vecchio's abrupt departure, Fraser had been content to bask in the warmth of Kowalski's adoration. But, ultimately, he had been forced to break things off for both their sakes. Ray stayed in the Northwest Territory for no other reason than his devotion to Fraser. Day by day Fraser watched him grow more depressed, less self-assured. He was out of his element, clinging to Fraser like a lifeline in unfamiliar waters.

Finally, it had occurred to Fraser that Kowalski was struggling not only with his physical displacement, but with the fact of their sexual relationship. Some acts Ray felt uncomfortable with, while others he wouldn't do at all. Fraser had accepted his friend's limits, but he felt himself becoming more and more restive. It had been time for both of them to take another risk, to go off and find themselves again. Even though things had not worked out as he had hoped with Ray Vecchio, Fraser felt he had done the right thing in initiating the split with Ray Kowalski. He hoped that by now Kowalski was starting to understand. Fraser felt that their time together had left both of them richer, and he hoped someday Ray could feel that way, too.

Another young woman passed by, her avid glance raking up and down his body. With a touch of irritation, Fraser felt himself blush as he avoided her eyes. Dief whined and bumped against his leg. The wolf almost seemed to be protecting him today. In truth, Fraser was much more unsettled than usual since he had made the decision to return to Chicago. He wondered now why he had thought things would be different. Ray Vecchio had shown him every sign of friendship, but none of love. Had it been obsession that made Fraser leave his country to seek out a man he had loved for two years and then had hardly seen for two more?

He knew that there were unresolved

feelings lying in wait for him once he was back in Ray Vecchio's presence. It wasn't Ray's fault that Fraser had lost his sense of being in balance with the world. Despite that last night when Fraser had confessed his feelings, nothing had changed, and Fraser had to accept it. Things could never be any deeper between them.

As soon as Ray was settled again and Fraser made sure he was all right, perhaps he should think about going back up north. That was where his center lay.

But, first, there were hours to enjoy in Ray's presence. It wouldn't do to poison that time with undue regrets about things no one could help. Feeling a bit better, Fraser headed for home.

At eight sharp, Fraser steered the pink and orange Riv into the parking lot of the nondescript cement-block building that served as the FBI's Chicago office. He knew he should offer to drive home, but he hoped that Ray would refuse. Getting here through unfamiliar streets had been a bit more nerve-wracking than he had imagined.

Someone had smoothed his way through the system. After facing the woman at the entry desk, he had been efficiently searched and sent to the third floor with an i.d. badge clinging to his collar. Ray's door looked just like every other door in the hallway except for the number. Fraser shifted the small package of clothing he was carrying to his left hand and knocked with his right. The door opened quickly, as if someone had been standing just in front of it.

"See you, Carson," came Ray's caustic voice. "Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out."

Looking peeved, Carson left the door open for Fraser and walked out into the hall without ever turning back towards Ray. Fraser bit back a remonstrance about speaking to people so rudely, but Ray knew him too well.

"What?" Ray stood by the bed wearing nothing but a pair of paisley silk boxer shorts. His left side was covered with thick white tape with dark bruises showing around the edges.

"Agent Carson looked upset," Fraser remarked in what he hoped was a neutral tone.

Ray snorted. "Yeah, he ought to be. The bastard lied to me as easy as breathing. At this point I don't even know who ordered that hit on me. I don't think he'd tell me if it was the *famiglia*. Maybe he just told me it was Martinetti because he thought that would make me go back to Vegas. Who the hell knows?"

"Who's Martinetti?" Fraser asked innocently.

Ray frowned at him and then looked away. "That's the drug dealer they saw at the Velvet Glove. He finally got picked up there last night. I don't know what the hell took them so long."

"So you were telling me the truth," Fraser blurted, and was immediately sorry.

Ray's laser eyes were on him in a second. "You thought I lied?" he asked angrily.

"I thought you might be trying to protect me from...something else." Fraser shifted his feet uncomfortably. He didn't want to reopen this subject.

"I was. But it was true." Ray folded his arms defensively against his chest, and Fraser saw the long stitched cut on his forearm.

"What happened to your wrist?" he asked, wondering if they were going to argue.

Ray glanced down. "I got in a fight. A guy with a knife came after me. I'm lucky I got off this easy." He spotted the package in Fraser's hand. "You brought my clothes? Good, because if I went home like this I might get arrested." He smiled briefly and reached for the clothes. Fraser breathed a

sigh of relief. Ray was going to let his remark pass by.

As Ray turned to place the bag on the bed, Fraser saw Ray's back. The welts were dark red seams, the bruises purple blotches running to green around the edges, which meant that the beating had taken place at least a week to ten days before. Fraser could see it in his mind, the nightsticks or pipes coming down on Ray's flesh time and time again. He should have been there to help. Fraser shut his eyes as if he could escape the vision that was spreading panic through his chest. Ray must have heard his sharp intake of breath.

"Benny?" Ray was calling to him, his voice gentler than it had been since Fraser arrived. Fraser heard him approach. "What is it, Benny?"

Fraser opened his eyes. Ray was just in front of him, trailing a pair of pants from one hand.

"You were hurt," Fraser said, trying to calm down. He didn't want to reveal how upset Ray's injuries had made him.

"Yeah," Ray said, putting a hand lightly on Fraser's arm. "It was bad. But I'm okay now. Hey, Benny, don't worry about it."

Fraser took a deep breath. "I wish I could have helped you."

"Me, too," Ray said. "With you there, we would have made short work of those guys. This time it was only three against one, not like last time when we practically had the whole cellblock after us."

"I tried to get in this time," Fraser said hesitantly. "Without a job I was afraid I'd get deported if I got myself arrested even for some minor infraction, but I tried to talk to you. You didn't—"

"Yeah, I know," Ray said with a dismissive gesture that clearly meant he didn't want to talk about this. "Hell, Benny, just forget it. I managed okay by myself. Of course, with you there like the last time I wouldn't have gotten this crack on the head." He patted Fraser's arm and then turned away to step into

his pants. The thin gray turtleneck went quickly over his head. In a second he had socks on and had slipped on his shoes. Except for the marks on his face and the mustache, he looked like the old Ray. Pulling his shield and wallet out, he crumpled the bag and threw it in the trash. He considered the shield a moment before pocketing it. "Thanks for bringing this, Benny." He looked around the room as if trying to think of something. "Let's go," he said finally. "I'm outta this dump. You got the car keys?"

Gratefully, Fraser tossed them over. Ray flinched when he caught them in his right hand. "Damn stitches," he muttered.

Until they got to the security desk at the back door, no one stopped them or even seemed to notice them, which Fraser found odd. He remarked on it to Ray.

"Oh, they know we're leaving," Ray said quietly. "I screwed up their precious plans, and they're pissed off. But maybe they'll never ask me to work with them again. I was almost tempted to tell Carson I changed my mind again, just to see his face."

As they left the building, Ray's mood seemed suddenly more buoyant. While they drove home he asked Fraser about the Vecchio family, about all the relatives he had met at the house the night they thought Ray was dead. Fraser didn't know any of their names, so he had to describe each one and listen to Ray's commentary.

"Was Vinny there?" Ray asked suspiciously. "I bet he was, that freeloading bastard."

"I don't know, Ray," Fraser said. "What does he look like?"

"He's thin as a rail, and he eats like he's starving all the time, you know? Anywhere there's free food, he's there. It's like he's got radar. He wears these old suits, jackets all pulled up in the back, to make

everyone think he's poor, but he's loaded. His pop died and left him a sausage-making business that sells to every Italian restaurant in Chicago, so what does he do? Does he go out and buy a few suits for himself? No, he wears his pop's old suits that are fifteen years out of date and don't fit him, either. Sheesh, what a *cafone*."

"He was there. At least, a person fitting his description was there." Fraser smiled at the colorful aptness of Ray's description. When he'd seen the man in question, Vinny had been huddled over a plate of cold cuts and bread, and his suit most definitely had not fit.

"See, what did I tell you?" Ray hit the steering wheel for emphasis. "What about Angelo?"

As they got through all the cousins and aunts, Ray gradually fell silent. He seemed to be brooding now, and Fraser wasn't sure whether a comment would be welcome, but Ray himself finally broke the silence.

"I was in prison for, what, two weeks?"

"Almost eighteen days," Fraser said automatically.

Ray looked at him. "Benny, you were counting?"

"I suppose I was," Fraser said, abashed.

"That's nice, Benny. It's good to know somebody was. Anyway, I was in there eighteen days, and it felt like forever. I mean, I spent whole nights with my hands cuffed behind my back. And now I'm out, and I'm fucking *driving*. It feels weird, like they're gonna come and get me and tell me I gotta go back inside." He shuddered.

"That's understandable," said Fraser reasonably. "You told me that, last time, you had trouble letting go of your persona. Maybe this time you're having the same experience."

"Oh, no, Benny," Ray said quickly. "This time I let go of that bastard real quick. He's dead." Something about the way he said it made Fraser search his face. "I almost went back to Vegas, you know."

"I wasn't sure." Fraser tried not to show

how shocked and hurt he was to have his guess confirmed. He thought Ray had put this all behind him. Why was he so preoccupied with this character he'd been playing? Almost not wanting to know, Fraser hesitated, and then asked, "Why, Ray?"

The answer came swiftly. "Because I was an idiot. I had to act like a lowlife in there. I had to fight, and threaten people and be a complete asshole. So I started thinking of myself that way. It was like I deserved to go back. I was turning into my pop or something. I can't explain it."

"I think you just explained it very well," Fraser said thoughtfully. "But if you felt that way, why didn't you go?"

Ray was silent, watching the road. It was as if he hadn't heard the question. They turned onto Ray's street and bumped down into the parking garage. Ray pulled into his parking space and stopped. He turned off the motor, which chugged a few times before dying with a wheeze.

Ray made as if to open the door, but Fraser laid a hand on his arm. He thought his question was important, and he wanted an answer.

"Why didn't you go, Ray?" he repeated.

Ray turned on him, his face taut with anger. "You wanna know why?"

"Yes, Ray, I do."

Gripping the steering wheel with both hands, Ray sighed and looked down. He seemed embarrassed now, and spoke as if he was forcing out the words. "Because I heard you went running off down the street after Martinetti. All I could think of was that you were risking your life to catch the guy who shot me. It didn't seem fair to have you come back and find out you'd done all that for the Bookman." He got out of the car and slammed the door.

Fraser got out slowly. "That's the only reason you didn't go?"

"Nah, there were lots of reasons," Ray said, shrugging. His hands were in his pockets, his back was hunched, and he was looking at his feet. Fraser didn't have to be a student of body language to know Ray was nervous. "My family. This damn Riv. I haven't had it painted yet." He jabbed the elevator button and the doors opened immediately. They rode in silence up to Ray's floor.

When they walked through the door of the apartment, Ray stopped and took a moment to look around.

"Wow," he said simply. He sat on the sofa and stretched out his arms along the back while Fraser just stood and looked at him. "It's amazing to sit on something that feels good. Everything felt lousy in prison, you know?"

Where Ray's sleeves pulled up, Fraser could see red marks around his wrists. The sight made something inside him cringe as if he were personally responsible for the damage. That was how he often felt when he saw hurt or trouble. When he himself was injured, sometimes he almost felt relieved to be done with the guilt for a while. His grandmother used to tell him he over-identified with others, that he couldn't cure all the world's ills. Objectively, Fraser knew that. Practically, he always seemed to try.

Seeing Ray hurt was much worse than if it had been a stranger. Fraser felt paralyzed. What could he do now about all the pain that Ray had felt? He had tried to get into the prison and do what he could to help, but Ray had rejected him. It had hurt to see Ray turn away. They hadn't talked about that yet, and he wondered if they ever could. The brief connection they had felt in the car seemed to have faded. Fraser didn't know how to get it back.

"Hey, I'm starved," Ray said suddenly. "What do you say? Let's order a pizza."

"I already have," Fraser said, inordinately pleased that he had anticipated something Ray wanted. "It should be here at 9:15."

"Benny, you're a wonder," Ray said, shaking his head. "How did you know exactly how much time it would take to drive there, pick me up, and get back here?"

"I looked at the map, and I made a few simple calculations..." Fraser answered as he knew Ray expected him to. This banter felt more comfortable than contemplating the risks Ray had taken, the fact that he might never have come back.

"What if there were complications?" Ray was saying, waving his arms. "There could have been an accident on the road or something."

"That was highly unlikely on those roads at this time of the evening," Fraser said. "But, of course, something could have occurred, in which case we would have been late. I'm only human."

Ray was looking at him intently. "Are you, Benny? Because there have been times over the last few years when I've wondered about that."

Fraser opened his mouth but no sound came out. He didn't know what Ray was asking him or how to answer, but he felt that he was being challenged in some fundamental way.

"Ray," he said finally, "I have problems, just like everyone else. I grew up under unique circumstances that have perhaps given me a different perspective, but I..." He watched Ray's expectant face turn disappointed. "What are you asking me, Ray?"

Ray looked at his shoes. "I don't know, Fraser. Forget it."

Suddenly, Fraser seemed to understand. "I make mistakes, Ray. I've made some terrible mistakes."

Ray looked at him and nodded. "So have I, Benny. So have I."

"Ray," Fraser said, forcing out the words, "I admire what you did. Your sacrifice. It was...courageous."

Ray stared at him, wide-eyed. "You do?" he asked slowly. "Really?"

Fraser took a step closer. Ray's gaze seemed to thrill through his chest like an electric current. "Yes, I do," he said softly, reaching out with one hand. Ray stirred as if he were about to reach out, too.

The buzzer sounded once, then again, and still Fraser stood, watching Ray looking at him. It rang a third time, a long, impatient sound. There was a silence, then one more tentative buzz. Fraser walked over and picked up the intercom, breaking the spell. When he looked at Ray, he still felt a pulse of excitement running through him. Had it been his imagination, or had something important, something new, passed between them?

After they ate, Ray went off to take a shower while Fraser set about doing the last thing on his list: changing the sheets so he could give Ray back his bed.

"I admire what you did. Your sacrifice. It was...courageous."

As the hot water drilled down on his sore body, Ray still basked in the glow those few words had given him. The whole time Ray was in prison—hell, the whole time he was in Vegas being the Bookman—Fraser had still thought of him as Ray Vecchio. Fraser had never thought of him as the Bookman. That simple idea, so obvious on the surface, seemed to Ray like a revelation.

Ray would have stood longer under the hot water, but the doctor had warned him about softening the tape on his ribs. He got out reluctantly and dried off. The heater and fan were efficient enough to keep the mirror almost clear, and Ray stopped in front of it, transfixed by what he saw.

A thin, balding man in his late thirties stared back at him. His face showed signs of bruising and one eye was blackened. From under the tape on his ribs, dark purple bruises showed, extending to the middle of his chest.

Up higher were the two old bullet wounds, one entrance and one exit wound, shiny rounds of scar tissue. His cheek was cut, as was his shoulder, which had probably needed stitches. His head sported a scab and a bruise. On his forearm, the long stitched cut extended from his elbow nearly to the back of his hand. His wrists were ringed with chafing and contusions. He looked into his own eyes. They were pale green, tired, slightly sunken. His skin was sallow. He had a little mustache, and he needed a shave. A lean, spare body, a bit the worse for wear.

He fingered the thin mustache across his upper lip. Frannie had said she liked it. But she didn't know the half of it. His right hand shot forward and took up his shaving brush as he turned on the hot water with his left. When it steamed, he wet the brush and lathered it up with shaving soap. Coating his face with the warm foam, he shaved methodically until all that remained of the shaving cream was the area above his lip. Staring for a second, he took a deep breath and went after it. In six strokes of the razor the thing was gone. Ray splashed water on his face and dried it with a towel. A few drops of aftershave made him feel almost like himself again. Himself?

If he lost his memory as Fraser had once, who would he be? Would he be the Ray Vecchio that Fraser knew, or would he be that monster who had possessed his body over the last few weeks? Would Ray be his own man, or the man his father had wanted him to be?

The Bookman used people as tools. He was a killer who met violence with violence. His ego, his pride, came before everything. But winning didn't make him happy—it just kept the darkness at bay. Armando Langoustini was an empty shell that always needed filling. That was his secret, and that was how he had almost defeated Ray. But somehow Ray had

prevailed. He was still standing and the Bookman was dead.

Or was he? For nearly four years, Ray had wanted Fraser in his bed, and for all that time something had stopped him from trying, was still stopping him. Maybe the Bookman's voice was still whispering to him, coming between him and Fraser. But Ray didn't want the Bookman anywhere near Benny. Benny deserved more than that. Benny deserved Ray.

Benny had called him courageous. Considering the source, that was an incredible compliment that Ray wasn't sure he had earned. Sometimes Ray didn't think too much of himself. Sometimes he saw himself as the failure his pop had seen. But when he looked at himself through Benny's eyes, when he heard Benny say that he had left Kowalski for him, or that he admired Ray's sacrifice—well, maybe Ray should give himself a break. Maybe he should give them both a break. Things suddenly seemed a lot simpler than they had a month ago. Maybe Ray did have something to offer Benton Fraser.

Wrapping a towel around his waist and tucking the end in, Ray walked into the bedroom. It was empty, and the bed, newly made with perfect precision, looked clean and cold. Instead of going to the dresser to get some underwear, Ray walked out into the hall.

"Benny?" Ray called doubtfully. Fear assailed him as he wondered if his friend had done something crazy like making the bed and then packing up and moving to the park.

"In here, Ray," came Fraser's hearty voice. Ray breathed out hard with relief.

Ray found him in the living room, lying on his open sleeping bag with a book in his hand. He was wearing starched white boxers and a sleeveless tee-shirt.

"What are you doing, Benny?"

"Reading."

Ray chuckled. "Well, yeah, but why aren't you in bed?"

Fraser blinked. "I changed the sheets for you. I just assumed that you'd take the bed.

You probably need to get some rest."

"I don't feel half as bad as I look, Benny," Ray said, smiling, although, in truth, he felt weak and tired, and his ribs ached, too. "It's a big bed. You know, king sized. It's... I mean, I don't think we'd disturb each other if we both slept in it. We've slept together before—I mean, on trips, and stuff." He trailed off awkwardly as Fraser stared at him. Unable to think of anything else to say, Ray held out a hand and Fraser took it to rise.

They stood facing each other uncomfortably. Ray pushed himself to speak. He had taken so many risks to be the Bookman, but he hadn't taken a risk for the one thing he really wanted.

"Benny, I have something to say." Ray cringed to hear his voice sound so thin as he wiped his sweaty palms on the towel.

"Yes, Ray?" Fraser looked as he always did—standing straight, looking at Ray's face with those inscrutable eyes. Fraser hardly ever looked expectant, Ray realized, just patient. Whatever you had to say, he was going to hear you out, without judgement, without apparent prejudice. Afterwards came the critique in such gentle terms you hardly felt the knife going in, but somehow if he disagreed with you he left you feeling selfish, inadequate, less than human. Benny didn't mean to hurt you. It was just something he did.

Ray suddenly wondered why he was doing this. What if things had changed since that night? What if Benny didn't want him anymore? It was too late for doubts. He just had to do it. Getting a grip on himself, Ray took a breath and went on.

"That night, when I left for prison. You tried to tell me something. I just... I couldn't answer you. It's always been bad timing with us, Benny." He felt helpless. Benny was looking at him with those deep blue eyes. Ray saw interest there, but not a flicker of desire. The seconds were ticking

away, and he didn't know how to do this.

"It's all right, Ray," Fraser said, starting to turn away.

"No, Benny, it's not all right." Ray laid his hands on Fraser's shoulders and looked into his friend's eyes, searching for the right words. If he didn't get this said now, he'd never do it, and they'd drift apart without knowing if it could have worked, and Ray would spend the rest of his life feeling the way he had the past year. Anything was better than that, even humiliation.

Ray was tired and bruised and sick of pretending, and his feelings were suddenly very close to the surface. The curves of Fraser's shoulders fit into the hollow of his palms, and just touching Benny's bare skin like this was turning him on. He wanted Benny, dammit, more than anything or anyone he could possibly have. Even if he couldn't keep him, even if it didn't last, Ray wanted to return that kiss, to show Fraser that he wasn't alone.

Fraser's body seemed to radiate heat, and Ray was so close he could smell that pine and cedar scent that emanated from Fraser's skin. There was no aftershave that smelled like that. It was the scent of the woods, the wide open spaces, of all the things that were the antithesis of Ray's urban world, all the exotic things Fraser represented.

A wave of desire struck through him. Ray felt his life contract to a point and stretch out before him from this moment. He had to do it, had to try to make Benny his. He leaned in for the kiss carefully, watching for any sign of surprise or rejection, but Benny didn't move away. Their lips met, once, then again. Ray opened his mouth and slid his tongue between Benny's parted lips, touching his teeth, then his tongue and his palate. Benny tasted masculine, forbidden. An uncontrollable impulse drove Ray to smooth his hands hard down Fraser's muscled back and up again to clutch at his shoulders. He laced his fingers through Fraser's hair, holding his head steady for their kiss. Nothing mattered but having this, keeping it.

Fraser seemed warm and solid in his arms, but at any moment he could draw away. Ray had to make him see how good it could be. He slipped one hand to Fraser's waist and pulled their hips together.

Fraser was returning his kiss, his lips pliant against Ray's, his hands smoothing down Ray's back. Ray broke away for a breath and put his lips to Fraser's throat, sucking at the skin, filling his lungs with that wild, exotic scent. And then Fraser's hand trailed down to his waist and tugged on the towel. Ray stepped back to let it drop to the floor. Excitement clenched in his gut. Benny wanted this, wanted him. At least this once they would be together, and Ray was going to take Benny as high as he could while he had the chance.

Ray yanked at Fraser's shirt, pulling it up and over his head as their lips parted and rejoined. Fraser's shorts went down under Ray's hands. The first shock of Benny's hot flesh against his made Ray cry out. He had waited so long, that now he couldn't wait for anything. He reached down and took Fraser's hardness into his hand, feeling Fraser stumble against him with the touch. Fraser's body was moving against his, filling Ray's hands with heat. Their skins were hot and slick against each other. Ray smoothed back Fraser's foreskin with his thumb, and again Fraser faltered and groaned in his ear. The intimacy of that sound sent chills up his spine. There had been times when he wouldn't have believed it, but the unflappable Mountie could be undone by desire. Ray desperately wanted to hear that sound again.

Ray broke away suddenly, mouthing a line of kisses down Fraser's chest and belly to kneel as he took Fraser's erection into his throat. With both arms around Fraser's body, he swallowed him over and over, hearing him moan, feeling Fraser's hands on the back of his head.

"Ray, oh, Ray, I'll fall," Fraser

gasped.

Laughing, Ray released him and Fraser crumpled to his knees. "Let me do you, Benny," Ray whispered. "I want to eat you."

Fraser lay back, and Ray followed him down, kneeling between his legs. He wanted to take the time to make this good, but it was hard to slow down. Making up for four years' worth of repressed longing, he didn't have enough hands to touch or eyes to see. Like a starving man he mouthed Fraser's cock, swallowing him, letting the head bump against the back of his throat as he sucked it in.

"How are you doing that?" Fraser cried, raising his head off the floor. "It's so— It's—I've never—" His hands made abortive motions in the air as if he didn't know where to put them.

So Kowalski didn't know all the tricks. Fraser lay there looking at him with glazed eyes, crying out as he moved his body to the rhythm of Ray's touch, just as Ray had always wanted to see him. Ray was acting on impulse now, overwhelmed by what he saw and felt, by his own desire and Fraser's response. Benny wanted him, Benny was his. Ray wanted to give Benny everything he had. Wetting a finger, he eased it up inside Fraser as deep as it would go. The Mountie bucked under him, drawing up his knees and spreading his legs. A wild joy tore at Ray's heart to see his friend so open, so uninhibited, lying there spread out for him moaning and pleading, calling his name.

Fraser came hard, panting and gasping and yet watching Ray the whole time as if in wonder. As Fraser came, Ray sucked him in deep, feeling the hot liquid pulse down the back of his throat. His mouth filled with the salt-musk taste. Fraser had come in his mouth; Fraser's scent was all over him. Ray was almost panting with need himself by now, but he kept Fraser's cock in his mouth until Fraser laid a hand on his head. He let go, withdrew his finger, and eased himself up on Fraser's chest. Ray laid his erection against Benny's groin and groaned a little at the touch of his hardness

against the soft flesh. Fraser took it into his hand and Ray kissed him, content to come this way with Fraser's hand on him and their mouths together.

Fraser sought Ray's mouth and Ray could tell he was being tasted. Fraser was tasting himself on Ray, and what would normally have disgusted Ray made him moan with lust. With Benny's tongue in his mouth, he thrust himself through Benny's hand and came.

Oh, god, how he had wanted Benny, still wanted him. He remembered coming like this before, weak with desire, with love. It had happened with Irene, with Ange, even with Stella a few times. But never with a guy had it felt this right before. It scared him a little, but now that he had taken this step, his fear had shrunken to a little voice murmuring in the background. He'd learned through his long attempt at denial that he needed to pursue this no matter what.

"Aw, Benny," he said a little breathlessly, "do you know how long I've waited for this?" Fraser hummed softly in his throat. Ray wondered why Fraser didn't speak. When was the last time the Mountie didn't answer a question, even a rhetorical one, with a long disquisition on nothing? Ray could have used some of those extra words right at the moment.

"Benny?" Ray said tentatively, anxiety suddenly gripping him, "you're awfully quiet. Was it all right? I mean, did I—"

Fraser's arms tightened around him. "Excuse me, Ray. I wasn't aware you really expected an answer. I imagine you've been waiting about four years, not that I was aware of it. I suspect that both of us were ashamed of our feelings and afraid to make the first move."

Now Ray was struck dumb. "Yeah," he said lamely.

"And as to the question of whether it

was 'all right,' I thought perhaps you could tell from my reactions that it was—"

"Yeah," Ray said again, feeling silly for asking. But Fraser continued.

"It was quite extraordinary, Ray, to finally be able to touch you in an intimate manner." He hesitated. "I, too, have been waiting. But since that night you left, waiting has been... difficult."

Looking into Fraser's eyes, Ray saw something tentative there. Maybe Fraser was as scared as he was that this was a one-time thing. "I'm sorry I turned away from you that night," Ray said softly. "I couldn't deal with it right then. I had to be in character. It tore me up to walk out of here." He felt a flash of annoyance at the guilt that hit him when he saw the hurt in Benny's eyes. "Couldn't you see that? I had to go."

"I thought perhaps you might change your mind."

Ray wondered why he had never thought of it at the time. It had been an assignment, sure, but it was strictly voluntary. There had been a choice, and it was his to make. He could have stayed here with Benny. He could have skipped all the pain, the manipulation. He could have dumped the Bookman three weeks ago, or a year ago, as he should have. What the hell was the attraction of that creep?

"Benny, I—" He almost couldn't say it. "I'm sorry."

Benny ran his hands over Ray's scalp and smiled. "It's all right now, Ray," he said.

Embarrassed, Ray dropped his head down so that his forehead rested against Fraser's. Their skin slid together with sweat. Ray hated feeling sweaty, and lying on the floor made him uncomfortable and restless. "We'd better get cleaned up and go to bed," he said.

The late morning sunlight streamed though a crack in the curtains. Ray winced and

held the phone a little away from his ear. "Yes, Ma," he said, "I'm really all right. That wasn't me. Ma, I swear, it was a guy who looked like me. Well, how come I'm not dead, then? Ma, I'll see you tonight. Put Frannie on the phone. Yeah. I love you, too." He grinned at Fraser and rolled his eyes. "Frannie, you have to convince her it wasn't me. Yeah, I know she's not stupid, Frannie, she's my mother. Because it's dangerous for her to know. If she tells anybody she could get me killed. So, what the hell were you thinking, having all the cousins over like that for free food? What the hell was it, a wake?"

Fraser felt uncomfortable listening in like this, but Ray had asked him to stay where he was. He wasn't at all sure how Ray could talk to his mother and sister so comfortably while he and Fraser were lying in bed stark naked. He supposed he was being irrational, but it just didn't seem respectful that Ray's hand was straying over Fraser's thigh as he spoke, stroking up to stop just short of his genitals, and then suddenly it wasn't stopping short anymore, and Fraser had to muffle a small cry of surprise.

"Okay, okay. I'll be there at 6:00. And I'm bringing Fraser. Yeah. Tell Ma. Bye." Ray hung up and climbed on top of Fraser, seemingly in the same motion. "Why did it take me so long to do this?" he asked. "Am I stupid?"

"No, Ray." He smiled. There had been a time when he hadn't understood Ray's habit of asking rhetorical questions, but now he knew that Ray liked to have validation for his feelings on a steady basis from an interlocutor. Fraser needed to remember that this was probably especially important to Ray now that they were pursuing an intimate relationship.

"Good. We got that settled." They kissed for a while until Ray broke away. "I got one more call to make. I gotta call my

shrink. He probably thinks I'm dead, too."

"What about Lieutenant Welsh?"

"Shit. Two more calls." They continued to kiss, and Ray's movements became more insistent. "I don't get it, how we can both be hard again already when we've been making it all night," he said in a throaty voice with his mouth against Fraser's cheek. It sent a chill down Fraser's spine to feel Ray's hot breath on his face. It made him suddenly want to be on top of Ray, to be the one setting the pace. It hadn't seemed to happen that way all night.

He pushed against Ray as if to turn him over, but Ray resisted. "Let me lie on you," Fraser whispered.

"Come on, Benny. Let me do this," Ray said tightly, licking his neck. When Ray bit him a little too hard on the shoulder Fraser stopped pushing.

There was something like a warning in Ray's tone. Fraser didn't want to challenge him right now, although he found the implications disturbing. He could accept Ray's need for control right now, although not indefinitely. He filed a mental note for later and pulled Ray tight against him.

Fraser had thought he was never going to have this. He had thought he and Ray would pass each other by, and it would have been a tragedy. Fraser remembered again the night Ray left, when Ray had turned away from him. Taking Ray's face in his hands, he brought their lips together to ease the pain of that memory with the reality of touch. Ray's lips yielded to his entry, and his mouth tasted like a miracle.

They were moving slowly now, already sated from a night in each other's arms. It had been good, so good that they couldn't stop. Fraser's erection hadn't faded since the last bout but had stayed swollen, half-hard, sore with rubbing. He took Ray's backside in both hands to push Ray harder against him. He didn't even know if he could come again, but he wasn't averse to finding out. Their bellies were slippery now as Ray rutted against him, swiveling his hips to stroke his cock against

Fraser's. Fraser let himself be carried along by the sensations of Ray's body in his arms, Ray's skin against his, Ray's scent.

Ray had been right. Fraser had intended to throw himself away. He had come to Chicago to find Ray again, and when he had lacked the courage to approach his friend directly, he had found a place where there were other men, lots of men who wanted him, who wanted his looks to decorate their beds. He had decided to cheapen what he felt for Ray by letting them have him, but somehow he could never quite go through with it. It wasn't virtue that kept him from bedding a stranger. The terrible intimacy of sex had always frightened him. With Victoria, sex had been a sickness, a deep, hollow ache of guilt and sorrow and atonement for a bad decision and a ruined life, while, in Ray Kowalski's arms, he had found peace and pleasure and affection, if not love. But with both of them he had needed to feel a profound connection before he could submit to touch, a connection he had always felt with Ray Vecchio.

As Fraser shifted his hands down Ray's neck to his shoulders, Ray pulled out of the kiss and smiled at him, his eyes half closed, his lips flushed with kissing. He looked happier than Fraser had ever seen him.

"I wanted you so long," he whispered. "All that time. I can't stop saying it."

"Ray," Fraser whispered back. He couldn't say the things that were speeding through his head, the sequence of words, pictures and emotions that ran through him like water in a stream.

The two of them fit together so perfectly.

It seemed a strange thing to feel when Ray and Fraser challenged each other's assumptions, shook each other up on a regular basis, but Fraser found he

needed that friction to be complete. It was their differences that made him crave Ray's presence in his life. Ray was the only one who judged him, told him the truth. Ray had been the only one who could have made him stand up to Meg Thatcher about his uniform, who convinced him he had a right to have what he desired, as much right as any other human being.

Fraser had been hurt by the abandonment, by the waiting and rejection, hoping for Ray to see what was plainly before his eyes. But it almost didn't happen. Ray almost didn't accept what Fraser offered him. Although they really hadn't talked about it yet, Fraser guessed that Ray had been afraid. Even though Ray might not admit it, Fraser knew. Ray feared for his job, feared his family's rejection, feared to break the conventions of his upbringing. Most of all, Ray had feared to know who he really was.

Ray was getting close now, and Fraser had come to recognize the small, intimate signs he made, the gasps, the short breaths, the whispered repetitions of Fraser's name. Already they were less inhibited with each other. Ray's eyes were closed as he leaned his weight on his elbows, but his hands were on Fraser's chest, twisting his nipples, and Fraser was groaning, moving his hips, wishing he had words to say what he felt. He met Ray's lips for a long taste and then licked his sweaty cheek, already slightly raspy. Opening his eyes, Ray looked into Fraser's face and smiled, and then the smile faded, and Ray was burying his face against Fraser's neck, crying out softly. Fraser felt Ray come on his belly as he let himself dissolve into a brief spurt of pleasure, all that was left in him for the moment. They needed to rest.

As they lay there cooling off, Fraser heard Ray chuckle in his ear. "At this rate," Ray said, "I'll get those phone calls made by dinnertime."

Ray glanced at Fraser sitting next to him in the flower-power Riv, as he had started to think of it. Fraser wore his civilian clothes, of course, but he had insisted on bringing his hat, which was now on the dashboard where it belonged. Dief panted rhythmically in the back seat, puffing warm breath against his neck. All was right with the world. Ray smiled.

They had been lovers for something like 20 hours and they hadn't been able to keep their hands off each other. Even now, Fraser's hand had found its way to Ray's thigh, where it made a warm weight while he drove. It was going to be strange being around other people tonight, especially his family. Would what had happened between them be written all over their faces? He didn't want his family to know anything about it for more reasons than he could count.

They pulled up to the house and Ray turned off the ignition but made no move to get out of the car. The engine bucked on for a few seconds.

"Damn it," Ray muttered, "if I don't get this engine rebuilt soon I better buy a fire extinguisher."

"You won't want to take this car on a stakeout," Fraser commented.

Ray laughed briefly, then sighed. "So, you ready for this, Benny?" he asked, wanting to prolong their moment alone. In the back seat Dief whined softly.

"Don't be impatient," Fraser said a little sharply, turning back to face him. "In just a few minutes we'll go in the house, and I'm sure Mrs. Vecchio will fill you up with all sorts of inappropriate foods." He turned back to his friend. "Yes, Ray, I'm ready."

"Good, because I'm not," Ray said moodily. "They're gonna be all over me. 'Oh, *figlio mio*, I thought you were dead.' There always have to be dramatics, you know?"

"They love you, Ray. Can't you just enjoy it?" Fraser managed to say it without sounding peevish.

Ray squelched a flash of anger. "Enjoy it?" A second later he understood. "Oh, god, I know. You don't have a family, Fraser, and I'm sorry. It's just that the Vecchio family is too much of a good thing." He shook his head. "I'd miss them if they were gone, you know? But when I'm around them they make me sweat. It's like what you just said to Dief. You just know that Ma is going to stuff us with food all night long. She ain't gonna give us a choice."

"That's the only control she has, Ray."

Now Ray was puzzled. "What?"

"You're a detective. You're always in danger, and she never knows where you are or when you might be injured or in trouble. There's nothing she can do to protect you, or prepare herself."

It made sense. "I guess," Ray said grudgingly. "But she's gonna go nuts when she sees all these bruises on my face and the mark on my head. And I wore long sleeves even though it's 90 degrees out so she wouldn't see my stitches—and the cuff marks, shit, that's embarrassing. Actually, the worst thing is gonna be this little nick on my face."

It was Fraser's turn to look puzzled. "Why?"

"Because she'll say it makes me look like a mobster. Just wait. I bet she says it."

"It does," Fraser said, straightfaced.

Ray started, his heart pounding. "What?"

Fraser smiled. "I was making a joke."

"Wow. That freaked me out," Ray said, looking down at his lap. "That's not really funny right now, Benny."

"I'm sorry, Ray," Fraser said contritely.

They sat in silence for a moment. "I guess we better go in," Ray said. "We're fifteen minutes late." He jumped as an apparition appeared at the driver's side window. It had its hands on its hips.

"What the hell are you guys doing in

there, making out?" Francesca shouted. Ray felt Fraser's hand withdraw quickly from his thigh.

"We're just catching our breath," Ray said, opening the door. "Jeez, Frannie. I carry a gun. Don't sneak up on me like that."

As they walked in, all was chaos, and Ray did start to feel a bit like a returning hero as his sisters and his mother fussed over him, though the kids seemed more interested in Fraser and Dief.

"O, dio!" Ma shrieked suddenly, putting a hand to her face.

"What is it, Ma?" Ray asked, trying to push aside his irritation at being startled.

"O, madonna! Guarda la faccia! Your face! It's not enough you get shot down in the street, now you have a scar on your face. What will everyone say? You look like a Mafioso."

Catching Fraser's eye, Ray raised his eyebrows, and then they were both swept into the living room, where Tony was watching wrestling, to pass the time before dinner.

When they sat down at the table, Ray was just Ray again, as family arguments and business and old problems were aired to the exclusion of any informative conversation. It was nice to be forgotten so that he could glance down the table at his friend and think a couple of uninterrupted thoughts.

What Fraser had said sounded good, but it was hard to put into practice. *They love you. Just enjoy it.* What was there to enjoy in this bedlam where no one gave anyone a change to speak, and everyone went over the same old ground, the same old grievances, at every meal? Control. Fraser hit the nail on the head, as usual. Nobody had any in this family. Pop used to be in charge, and now it was...Ma? Himself? God, that was it. He had thrown the whole balance off by leaving the family and

doing his own thing. He was the eldest son, but he didn't spend much time in the neighborhood establishing his position. He didn't give a fuck about Frannie's shit or Ma's problems with the neighbors. All he wanted to do was get out of that endless round of bullshit. Maybe he did need to cut them a little slack, at least to play the game while he was here even if he forgot about it the rest of the time. His family needed him to take charge.

"Raymond," his sister Maria was saying petulantly, "I'm talking to you."

"Sorry, Mouse," he said, using his old nickname for her. "What did you say?"

"What do you think of a man who won't get me my own place?" she said, pouting. "Tony earns a good salary now. Why can't we move out?"

Glancing at his mother, Ray saw the sadness in her eyes. First his brother, then Ray, now Maria. It was the normal course of things for grown kids to move out, but Ma couldn't stand it. "I don't know," he said doubtfully, "do you really want to be paying a mortgage when you need to save up for the kids' college? That doesn't make sense."

"But then we'll never have a place," she cried. "Pop left the house to you."

Ray loved this house, but he also hated it. He had grown up here. He knew every board, and he had associations with every inch of it. "The house is for all of us, Maria," he said seriously. "I've got the responsibility right now, I'm paying the property tax and everything. I'm not charging you rent, and I never will. Live here and save your money. You'll have a place someday. And who the hell am I gonna leave this place to? It'll go to your kids." Ray was never going to live here again, but he had to stay in charge and make sure everything was all right for Ma. He'd be damned if he'd let Tony run the place into the ground.

Rising, he picked up the heavy platter of cutlets to return it to the kitchen and he saw the gratitude in his mother's eyes.

"Ray," Benny said, beaming at him, "I'd be glad to help you with the dishes."

"All right, Benny," Ray said, smiling back, "you're on. I'll even let you wash."

When Kevin had gotten Vecchio's call on Saturday afternoon, he had been feeling very low. He had been one of the millions who had seen the Bookman go down on national TV, and one of the few who had cared. Now, on Monday morning, he was trying to get his thoughts and feelings back in some kind of order before Vecchio walked through the door. It was different thinking about a man's life after it was over, because then the last chapter was finished and you could figure out what the life had meant. That was why autobiographies were always incomplete—a man could never know the meaning of his own life. Kevin had taken a lot of literature as an undergraduate, and he still sometimes went back and read Montaigne for insights like that.

Right now, the memory of Montaigne's words helped Kevin to focus. He had been thinking that Vecchio's life had been a waste, and that its violent end, under the shadow of the double life he'd been leading, had not been worthy of the man. Kevin had wished he could erase the memory of Vecchio being hit, falling back, writhing on the steps until the second shot hit him and he went still. Now he tried to picture the man walking and talking—the same, just somehow altered. Kevin reprimanded himself. It wouldn't do to make assumptions.

One thing he did know—Vecchio was a passionate man, a man who cared deeply for others. But, from his family to his ex-wife and girlfriend to his friend Fraser, he had always had trouble letting anyone know. Someone—Kevin suspected Vecchio's father—had taught him early on that tender

feelings were unworthy of a man. Kevin sighed. Even if Vecchio's friend didn't want a physical relationship, it would be nice to see them find some sort of closure where they at least discussed their friendship. Kevin shook his head. He wasn't here to plan out Vecchio's life for him. He was just here to help his patient find the possibilities that had almost been taken away from him in that terrible moment. One thing Kevin realized now was how bleak Vecchio's life seemed without them. Surely he could help the man with that.

The buzzer sounded, and Kevin rang Vecchio in.

Vecchio looked like a man who had been through a long illness, or was recuperating from a terrible accident. His face was pale and bruised, and he was thinner than before, almost emaciated. What Kevin hadn't expected was how calm Vecchio looked, calm and happy. He grinned as they said hello.

"Sorry I didn't call earlier. It was hard for me to realize how weird it was for everyone else to see me die, or think they did."

"Weird is an understatement," said Kevin. "Did you see it?"

Vecchio chuckled. My family must have seen it a hundred times, but they never taped it. Actually, I think it would have been a little strange if they had."

They laughed together. "It was awful," Kevin admitted. "Very realistic."

"That's what Fraser said." Vecchio got serious as he said this.

"Fraser? You mean you're speaking to him?"

"Oh, man, so much has happened since I talked to you," Vecchio said. Kevin felt that the authority barrier Vecchio had always been so conscious of—the doctor-patient separation—had disappeared for him. He was talking as he would talk to a friend, as if he wasn't thinking every moment that Kevin held some sort of power over him. "Fraser came over the night I was supposed to leave. He found me a car." Vecchio laughed. "A sort of a car. An old Riv, painted terrible colors. Anyway, I bought

it, and we talked, and he stayed in my place while I was gone."

"And he's still staying with you?"

"Yeah." Vecchio looked down.

Kevin wasn't sure what had just happened, but he started wondering exactly how well things were working out with Fraser. He decided not to pry. "So," he said, picking up a pencil from his blotter, "tell me how it felt to be the Bookman again."

Vecchio's shoulders stiffened. Kevin had hit the right button. "It felt like me," Ray said, glancing up at Kevin's face. "Much too familiar, like that's who I was meant to be. You know, I almost ordered a hit on someone's wife. The Bookman threatened to, and I almost went ahead and did it." He was silent for a moment, and Kevin let him be. "I think I might have killed someone," he said softly. "The guy had a knife and I had nothing, and he was trying to kill me, but—" He looked into Kevin's eyes. "I hope I didn't, but I'll never know."

"How did that make you feel?"

Vecchio's lips quirked into a tense smile but he skipped the wiseass comment. "For about a day, I felt like the shit of the world. I thought I ought to pay for what I had done. Then, later, I started thinking about all the ways the guy could have died in that fight when this whole crowd of guys piled on us, and how it might not have been me who did it. The guy cut me up a bit on the way down, and it could have been a lot worse for me, too. I guess I'm okay with it now." He chuckled humorlessly. "Not really okay. I mean that I know I can't do anything about it."

Kevin thought about how different this Ray Vecchio seemed from the one he had talked to three weeks ago. "If you had the chance, would you ever go back to being the Bookman?" he asked, turning the pencil slowly in his fingers. "Is there

something about him you can't live without?"

"Oh, god," Vecchio said forcefully, "I did have the chance, you know? And I took it. I was going back to Vegas when I was shot down."

"Really?" Kevin was shocked. "Why?"

Vecchio ran a hand lightly across his head, his fingers stopping briefly on the scab at the back. "Because I felt like I deserved it. I felt like I'd screwed up everything. Everyone who ever cared about me, I threw it back at them, hurt them. Sometimes I felt like I deserved everything I got in there—the cuffs, the beatings, the psychological torture. When I got roughed up one time, I almost died. But I knew how to answer that. I fought back, and then I got a weapon and waited for the guy to come at me again. The night I left, when Benny... See, that night he tried to kiss me—and, jeez, I'd been waiting for it for years, but I pushed him away. I was out of my depth."

"What about now?" Kevin asked, wondering if Vecchio would tell him.

Vecchio flushed and looked down at his shoes. "No, not anymore."

"Why do you think things are different?" Kevin asked, trying not to show his pleasure at the news.

Vecchio smiled a little, and it seemed that he was seeing something in his mind's eye that he wasn't going to share. "I'm not the Bookman," he said simply, looking into Kevin's eyes. "He died, but it wasn't at the courthouse. It was when I saw what I really meant to Benny." He stopped and stared at the blinds as if he were seeing something far away. "Benny saved me from myself."

Ray sat silently for a while, and Kevin could sense a rush of thoughts and feelings going through the man's mind, too fleeting to express. Finally Ray looked at him and smiled, shaking his head. "Sorry. So much has happened in the last few weeks. For a year nothing happened, and now all this."

"Can we go back to how you thought you deserved to be the Bookman?" Kevin said.

"I guess." Ray shrugged. "It was easier. All I felt was pain and anger. And I had power. There were no complications, no friendships."

"You were deeply attracted to that way of being, Ray. You embraced it for two years." Kevin leaned forward, intent on his point. "Your relationship with Fraser can be a wakeup call, but no one can change you but yourself. No one but you can save you, not even Fraser."

Ray breathed out sharply. "I don't want to be that guy anymore. He abandoned his family and friends, and he told himself he had a good reason for doing it, because it was an assignment. But when I got back, things weren't any better. I was no son to my mother. Stuff would happen around the house and I'd let Tony hire some guy instead of going around to see for myself. That's why they're only getting the house all fixed up from the fire now. Jeez, it's been two years."

"Fire?" Kevin queried.

"Don't ask," Ray said with a wave of one hand. "That was my fault, too."

Kevin tapped his pencil softly on the blotter. "You can't take the blame for everything."

"Yeah, but this really was my fault. Some guy I busted had it in for me and he got his partner to set my house on fire. She burned down Fraser's building, too. If Fraser hadn't been there, Frannie might have died."

"It sounds to me as if the person who set the fire is at fault."

"But I should have been there," Ray said. One clenched fist rested on each knee of his pressed linen slacks.

"You had a job to do."

Ray snorted humorlessly. "Yeah, you can't be in two places at once."

"You're determined to punish yourself, aren't you?" Kevin said sharply. "Why do you think you deserve to be

hurt?"

Vecchio's glance snapped back to his face. "What's your point?" he asked, his eyes hard.

"Can you let the past be the past?" Kevin asked, meeting his level gaze. "Can you let the Bookman go?" Ray continued to stare, his eyes cool, his face set. Kevin had the sense that he had retreated far into himself.

Suddenly he moved, sitting back and folding his arms against his chest. "That's what I'm trying to do," he said indistinctly, looking at the closed blinds. "Maybe it ain't as easy as I thought."

"You're right. It's not easy. We all have patterns of behavior that are hard to change, but you can do it. You can let other people in."

"What about the hurt?" Vecchio asked, looking down and away. His mouth was twisted with pain. "What about when they leave me? Irene left me because her family told her to. Angie took off, I'm not even sure why. People die. And Fraser..."

"Fraser...?" Kevin prompted.

"He'll have to go back north sometime. They'll call him, and he'll go, just like that. What am I supposed to do, quit my job and go live in an igloo? Even Kowalski couldn't hack it up there." His face looked miserable, his eyes downcast. "He left me once before, you know. He went away with Kowalski after I took a bullet for him. And, shit, now he says he left Kowalski for me, but I still can't get it out of my head that..."

"Let me ask you something," said Kevin, poising all ten fingertips on the blotter before him. "If you had a chance to wipe out all the hurt, all the heartbreak you ever suffered, would you do it?"

"Well, yeah," Vecchio said, puzzled.

"What if the price was the memory of every relationship you ever had?"

"You mean I'd lose them all? All the good times, too?" Vecchio sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He was starting to understand.

"That's right." Kevin waited, drumming his fingers lightly.

"I couldn't lose all that," Vecchio said. "It's part of me."

"Now turn it around," Kevin said, laying his hands palm up on the desk. "The price of all the good stuff is the hurt. There's no way around it. You can't control everything, Ray."

Vecchio laughed and shook his head. "Okay, I see your point," he said, "but that doesn't make it easy. You know," he continued more seriously now, "if we knew what was coming in a day sometimes we wouldn't even get out of bed in the morning. Jesus, I sound like an old fart."

"What about today? Was it worth getting out of bed for?"

Vecchio chuckled. "That was the wrong question. It was worth waking up for, anyway."

"What about tomorrow?"

"I hope it will be good, maybe better."

Without looking at the clock, Kevin knew from long experience that their time was up. He leaned forward and steeped his fingers. "You don't need the Bookman to protect you," he said.

"I thought I was using him to punish me." Vecchio sat back again and folded his arms.

"And as a protection against getting close to anyone."

"What do you mean? I let Fraser get close to me." He seemed to be retreating again.

"Think about it," said Kevin.

"So, Detective Vecchio," Lieutenant Welsh started slowly, "I'm glad to see you're still in the land of the living. I heard from our good friends the Feds that you had something of a rough time on your assignment. Is that the case?"

"Yes, sir," Ray said uncomfortably. He was so used to being called on the carpet in Welsh's office that he felt ill at ease sitting down in front of that desk where he had so often stood to take a reprimand.

"And you received several minor injuries, did you not?"

"Yes, sir. A concussion, some bruises and cuts. One needed 25 stitches." Ray didn't enjoy talking about this, but he didn't want to make light of it, either. It was only Monday morning, and he hoped to get at least a few days of sick leave to spend with Fraser. He pulled up his sleeve to show the stitches, and flushed when he saw the cuff marks were still there.

"That's all right, Vecchio," Welsh said, waving for him to lower his sleeve. He picked up a sheaf of paper from his desk and stared at it through his glasses. "Agent Carson has a few complaints about you."

"Oh, does he, sir?" Vecchio said, feeling his temper rise.

"As a matter of fact, yes. He said that you refused to go back to Las Vegas and play the part of the Bookman, and that this action messed up the operation."

Ray laughed bitterly. "There *was* no operation, sir. My contact was a plant who really didn't have any weapons to sell. The group that was supposed to buy from him bought from me—I mean, from the Bookman's organization, sir—and that's the only reason the agents were able to make the bust. To tell you the truth, Lieutenant, I believe that Carson's whole purpose was to get me to go back to Vegas as the Bookman."

"Hmm," Welsh said neutrally. "Is that so?"

"They were still trying to get me to go back after the hit, and I'm still not sure if it was the *famiglia* or some other guy who took a shot at me." He paused, frustrated. "I don't feel that Agent Carson dealt with me fairly, Lieutenant. I was being fed a line of bullsh—I mean, I believe he was lying to me through the whole

operation."

"I believe you, detective," Welsh said, nodding.

Vecchio blinked. "You do, sir?" he asked, surprised.

Welsh nodded. "I do. And since giving up your life to play the Bookman a second time wasn't really part of the deal, I have politely told our friends to go to hell, pardon my French, and I'm going to allow your reinstatement to stand."

"Thank you, sir," Ray said sincerely. Relief washed through him. He had suspected that Carson might give him a bad report, but not that the man would try to derail his career.

Welsh leaned back in his chair and pointed at Vecchio with one finger. "There are two conditions. One, that you continue to see the psychiatrist I sent you to until I tell you to stop, and two—" Welsh stopped suddenly. Removing his glasses from his nose, he leaned forward across his desk. "Detective Vecchio, I have to admit that I had some qualms about loaning you to the Feds for this assignment. But then I told myself that I couldn't overrule them. They'd complain to the top brass and I'd just get my head handed to me. And, after all, you came out of it all right the last time." He folded his hands on the desktop. "I couldn't have foreseen just how badly things would go, but I still have a bad taste in my mouth."

"Yes, sir," said Ray, who really wasn't sure where this was heading.

"The upshot is that to assuage my own guilt, and to comply with the recent changes in liability regs, I want you to take the rest of the week off in sick leave. But, remember, I expect you back in here a week from today ready to work. Be here bright and early in the morning, detective, not after lunch. My guilt only goes so far."

"Yes, sir." Ray rose, grinning. He never understood what made him turn back

and say, "What about the Mountie, sir?"

Welsh's eyes widened and he shook his head disgustedly. "I can't believe I just heard that. How exactly does the Mountie fit into all this?"

"He was just an innocent bystander, sir." Ray swallowed hard. "He's staying with me. He's on leave from the R.C.M.P., but I wondered if you'd mind if he came in to work with me, sir."

Welsh rose to face him with a sour expression on his face. "Do you have any further requests, Detective Vecchio? Any departmental resources you'd like to use? More time off, perhaps?"

"Uh, no, sir," Ray said uncomfortably. "Never mind, sir. Forget I said anything."

"No, detective, on the contrary. I was just checking to see how far you were planning to push it. Now that I think about it, the Mountie isn't a bad idea. In fact, anything that gets your case load down isn't a bad idea. Bring him in." Welsh paused. "Is the wolf staying with you, too?" he asked suspiciously.

Wide-eyed, Ray nodded.

"I thought so." He shook his head disgustedly. "By all means, bring the wolf in, too." Welsh waved a hand towards the door. "You're dismissed, Vecchio. Go home and get some rest."

Wondering if what he was about to do fit Lieutenant Welsh's definition of rest, Ray lost no time in leaving. It felt strange to be back in the bullpen, as if he had been gone a long time. He hoped that in a week he would have gotten over this feeling of disconnection.

As Ray drove home, he was still preoccupied with what Kevin had said to him. Was it true that he had used the Bookman to protect himself against closeness and hurt? That made sense to him. He'd always had a bad temper, and he had to admit that he used it to control people, to keep them at a distance. But the part about punishing himself bothered

Ray more than he could admit to Kevin. Was there a part of him that wanted to be hurt, that felt more comfortable hurt than okay? Had he taken the undercover assignment because he didn't think he deserved happiness? He hated the thought of being weak, of not knowing his own mind. What kind of a man wanted to be punished? He shook his head. What Kevin had said was bullshit. He wanted happiness as much as anyone.

When Ray opened the door to his apartment, it seemed dim inside. When he had left, the curtains had been open, but now they were tightly drawn. As Ray closed the door behind him Fraser took hold of him by the lapels of his linen jacket and pulled him close. Stunned, Ray realized two things. One, Fraser had been standing just behind the door waiting for him to come in, and, two, Fraser was naked.

"Hey, Benny, what are you doing?" Ray asked stupidly.

By way of an answer, Fraser licked Ray's neck as his hands pushed Ray's jacket down off his shoulders. Ray let it drop to the floor. As Fraser unbuttoned Ray's shirt, Ray tried to kiss him, but Fraser seemed to have a set plan, and the first step was undressing Ray.

When Ray walked in he would have sworn sex was the last thing on his mind, but the feel of Fraser's lips at his throat and Fraser's hands on his chest started making him hard.

"Let's go in the bedroom," Ray whispered. He felt a little awkward standing there while Benny did all the work.

But Benny's mouth pressed up against his, stifling his words. The Mountie kissed him roughly, forcing his mouth open, bending his head back as Fraser's hands squeezed his ass.

Ray guessed they weren't talking this time.

This was not the innocent Fraser Ray

had so long imagined, awkward with want and inexperience. Fraser had traveled this path before. He knew how to touch and where to put his hands, and what he needed. And yet he wasn't so sure of himself that his lovemaking seemed slick or mechanical. Ray caught a raw edge of need, of passion that was almost ashamed of itself, in some of Fraser's abrupt movements, in the way he hummed deep in his throat.

Letting him go, Fraser dropped to his knees to undo Ray's belt and pants. When Ray was standing there in nothing but his underwear, he felt Fraser's mouth at his waist and watched in stunned surprise as his friend took hold of the elastic of his boxers with his teeth and pulled them down. This wasn't the Fraser everyone thought they knew, the prudish Mountie who blushed when women got too close. This Fraser was desperate with lust, touching Ray with rough, possessive hands, nuzzling his face against Ray's erection as he breathed in deeply through his nose. Fraser was smelling him again. No one had ever done anything quite like that to Ray before. No one had ever wanted Ray in this much of an animal way. It was no wonder that Fraser usually seemed so repressed. His primal urge to smell and taste everything must be overpowering.

Ray laughed and was about to make a comment about Fraser being part wolf, but Fraser kissed him again. He broke off the kiss and Ray felt Fraser's tongue begin to lick his neck, then move up to rasp across his scalp, and come down again to delve into his ear. In his aroused state it was almost unbearable to feel that tongue inspect his skin. He never knew when Fraser would stop licking and begin a kiss, or end the kiss and find another patch of skin to make his own. He let it happen, allowing Fraser to move him around, to lift his arms and lick his armpits, which made him writhe. He realized that Fraser was claiming him, staking out his body, its textures and scents, as a sort of territory. Were they

making love, or they were mating? Ray almost laughed to think it—nothing was ever normal with Benny.

Fraser touched him as if he couldn't let go, and he never stopped moving his hands and mouth over Ray's skin, his face, his nipples. He couldn't stop touching, couldn't stop looking. Even knowing Fraser as well as he did, Ray had never seen his passion acted out. He'd seen Fraser focus so hard on something that the world seemed to go away, and right now he was the object of Fraser's complete attention. Him, not a muddy tire track or a smudged fingerprint, not Victoria or Ray Kowalski. Just him, Ray Vecchio. He realized he had always wondered what it would be like to be lit up by that beautiful gaze, those intense, intelligent eyes. And he thought with sudden regret that he hadn't given Fraser a chance to act his passion out the previous night. Ray had taken over.

Benny was looking at him with desire, with an intense hunger. It wasn't the Bookman that Fraser wanted so, it was Ray. And Ray understood again that, as much as he had felt like the Bookman, the people who loved him hadn't really seen that part of him. The Bookman had been much more important to Ray than to anyone else. The man his father had wanted him to be wasn't who Ray was. The man who might have killed Damien McCall, the man who had smashed someone in the face with a metal pipe, the man who lived in Vegas and ordered hits for the slightest insult—that was someone Ray had been pretending to be, but it wasn't him.

Fraser moved his head down to Ray's groin, where he didn't lick at first, but spent a long time just rubbing his face against Ray's cock and breathing in the scent until Ray thought he'd go mad.

"Benny, please," Ray begged. "Suck me." Ray had a full erection now and it ached for Benny's touch, which wasn't slow

in coming. It was hard to stay upright while Fraser licked his cock. It wasn't quite like being sucked because the stimulation varied from stroke to stroke, leaving Ray off balance. He thought he might fall if he closed his eyes. But, as much as he wanted this, it was making him impatient. Ray liked to be the aggressor, the one who thought of what to do and acted it out. It was hard for him to be passive. Right now, despite his earlier regret, he wanted to be the one controlling what they did. He had a vision of getting down on the floor with Fraser and taking over, pushing the Mountie back and lying on top of him. But that vision faded when he got another look at Fraser's face.

Fraser's eyes shone with purpose. He was consumed with passion, totally in the moment. Ray was still thinking and planning while Fraser was feeling and doing. Ray had reserved a little part of himself as a detached observer who stood apart from everything he was feeling in his body and his mind. With few exceptions, Ray realized he had always done this when he made love. He'd done it with Stella, with Angie. Among the only times he could remember really letting go were those first times with Irene and the other night with Benny. Something was wrong with him; something had been wrong with him for a long time. Kevin was right—he was distancing himself from the closeness in trying to avoid the hurt. But how do you make yourself let go?

Ray laced his fingers through Fraser's hair, trying to bring him closer. If only Benny would suck his cock... All this time Fraser had kept a grip on Ray's ass, and now Ray felt one finger insinuate itself shallowly inside him.

"Ray," Fraser said breathlessly, "would you mind? Is it all right if I...?"

Fraser wanted to fuck him.

It scared Ray to think about that. Fraser wanted to possess him, but did Ray want it? Did he want to let Fraser take charge of him, give him feelings he hadn't had in years, since he was a young man and had let guys he hardly even knew fuck him up the ass? Ray

hadn't let it happen too often once he found out how intensely personal it was to be taken that way and how vulnerable he felt. He had enjoyed it way too much, and he hadn't liked having a casual fuck break down his defenses that way.

But maybe that was a way to really be with Benny, to lose that disdainful, superior presence that stood between him and his lover. Benny had stood by him. He deserved to have whatever he needed from Ray.

"Yeah, Benny," he said, trying not to sound uncertain. "Go ahead." Benny was going to fuck him. How was he going to feel about this later? He couldn't deal with it now, so he pushed the feelings aside and kept on going through the motions. A cold pool of panic started to gather in his belly.

"I have some lubricant," Benny said eagerly, moving him over towards the couch.

"Where do you want me, Benny?" Ray asked. His erection was fading, and his balls ached. At Fraser's direction, he knelt in front of the couch and rested his chest against the cushions. "Take it easy, Benny," Ray said nervously. "I haven't done this in a long time." Christ, he didn't want it. Couldn't Benny tell?

All the times Ray had thought about making it with Benny he'd never thought about Benny taking him. When Ray was a kid, his father had drilled into his head an association between taking it up the ass and being a loser. When Ray had felt like a loser, he'd let strangers do him that way just to prove it, just to do the thing his father would hate for him to do more than anything else in the world. His father's voice was still there, sounding the hate-filled words through his head. It should have made a difference that this was Benny, not some guy he'd met in a bar, but it didn't.

"Would you rather not?" Fraser

asked, disappointment evident in his voice.

"No, Benny, do it," Ray said, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Go ahead and fuck me."

Ray expected to feel Benny's fingers lubing and stretching him, but what he felt first didn't jibe with that, and then he realized that Benny was licking him. Benny was licking his asshole, pushing his strong tongue past the ring of muscle, circling it around the opening. Of course. Of course Benny would want to taste him there. In spite of his uneasiness, Ray smiled. It had come to this, Benny's penchant for tasting things. He had tasted a hundred varieties of mud and rope and fabric. He had solved innumerable cases with his tasting. And now he was tasting Ray, and it turned Ray on to feel Fraser back there licking him with such enthusiasm.

He must have made a sound, because Fraser stopped and asked considerately, "Ray, do you mind that I'm doing this?"

"God, Benny, no," Ray was barely able to say. "You've got that talented tongue and you've been wasting it on mud. For chrissakes, use it on me." This was Benny, not some faceless stranger. Benny was doing this with passion, with love. It wasn't supposed to be a punishment. A guy who let someone else do him without wanting it was a whore. Ray had to trust him. Whatever else happened, he had to let himself feel.

Ray felt a lick on the back of his balls and a slick pair of fingers burrowed into him. Ray pushed back, and Fraser stretched him further. Then he felt the larger pressure—the hard part was coming. It hurt, and the more it hurt, the less he could relax.

The pressure stopped. "Ray, are you all right?"

"Yeah, Benny. It's okay. I just haven't done it in a few years. Keep trying." Ray's erection had faded again and his balls ached for relief. When Fraser's hand caressed them, Ray caught his breath.

"Ray?" came Benny's voice quietly in his ear. "Are you sure you really want this?"

"I'm scared, Benny," he said, barely whispering. "Just go slow, would you?"

Fraser's hand held his softened cock loosely. He pressed his face against Ray's neck and nuzzled him like a cat. "Tell me what you want, Ray," he said. "I'll do anything you want."

Fraser's words sent a chill up Ray's spine. Weren't those the words he'd always wanted to hear? There was no hint of reproach in Fraser's throaty voice, just desire. The panic started to drain away. Just remembering that he had a choice changed everything for Ray. "Touch me, Benny," he said. "I'll try to relax for you."

Then Fraser's fingers were in him again. Fraser's mouth was on his neck, licking wet stripes up across his ear and into his scalp. Ray leaned his head back, and Benny licked his cheek, then his eyelid, and that little gesture felt so intimate that Ray started to get hard. He pushed back against Benny's fingers so that they went in deeper, sending a jolt of pleasure through his body, and when he tried to push back again, Fraser withdrew his fingers and replaced them with his cock.

Ray shoved back to meet it as it entered him. It hurt at first, and then the pleasure struck through him again and he gasped. Fraser withdrew a little.

It felt the way it always had, as if he was crumbling, his defenses in ruins. He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the urge to whimper. Benny drove ever further inside him, closer to his core. Benny's thighs were between his, pressing his legs apart, opening him for each deepening stroke.

"Oh, god, Benny!" As the feelings engulfed him, the cry was torn from his throat.

Arching his back, Ray let himself be entered until he felt Fraser's belly flat against him. Benny stopped and held himself there, panting in his ear. Ray was letting Benny fuck him, and the presence of

his friend's body inside his own filled him with something like euphoria. Ray's body was shaking hard and he felt lightheaded. His muscles turned to water. Fraser's arms came around him as Fraser's chest touched down across his back. Ray felt teeth close on his neck, taking hold of him, claiming him.

For the first few minutes, Benny moved so slowly Ray began to feel frantic for that touch deep inside that was making him hard again. He wondered if Benny was trying to make it last, or if he was too close, but then he realized that maybe Benny was trying to be polite.

"Hey, Benny," he said shakily, "I won't break, you know. I ain't made of glass." Another touch to that spot made him catch his breath. He wanted it. Not because he was a loser, but because this was Benny, and Ray trusted him, and it did make a difference, damn it. Ray's father should rot in hell for training him to feel guilty about liking this.

"Fuck me hard, Benny," he said, his breathing ragged. "I want it. I want you. Give it to me all at once. Make me crazy."

Benny's arms tightened around his chest, and Ray felt him start to move faster. It was like lightning striking him over and over. Each time Fraser moved, Ray gasped and couldn't catch his breath. Fraser's body felt strong and sure over his, and Ray understood that the hardest thing about this for him was exactly this. When you were used to being on top it was hard to open yourself, to hold yourself suspended to be acted upon.

Fraser whispered his name, but Ray could only cry out hoarsely. He was possessed by the pleasure, steeped in it, owned by it. The shame had fallen away. He wasn't thinking anymore, just feeling Fraser move over him, giving him this, giving him back the right to be himself that he had abdicated to his father all those years ago. He wanted it to last but he didn't want it to slow down. And Benny, Benny was all over him, in him and all around him, making a series of little gasping moans in

his ear. Ray had never heard Fraser make any sound so needy and helpless.

Benny needed him. Benny was as desperate, as overwhelmed, as he was. And with that realization, Ray released his last doubts

Ray let it happen, and when the pleasure had built up so high it spilled over, he made a sound he couldn't control and spent himself into Benny's hand. Fraser was crying out too, holding him so hard around the chest it felt like an iron band.

Ray was out of breath, lying on his back on top of Benny. He wasn't sure how he'd gotten there, unless Fraser had pulled them both over backwards onto the carpet. There must be semen splashed on the couch, but Ray didn't care. He turned to face his friend, his whole body still throbbing to the pulse of what they had just done. If Fraser's face had shown the least bit of smugness or superiority, Ray might have slugged him, but what he saw there made him do nothing more than lay his head down silently on Benny's chest. He felt humbled and a little shamed, amazed that Benny could have given him that without making it about who was on top. All he had seen in Benny's eyes had been pure gratitude.

Ray had been able to feel vulnerable without retreating into anger, without becoming Armando Langoustini. He felt like a new man.

When Ray woke up the next morning, he was sure that life was good. The sunlight seemed to glow a little brighter than usual, although that might have been because he didn't wake up until after 10. His body was sore, and every time he sat he had to remember what he and Benny had done the night before. That memory brought with it a hint of shame. He still felt open and vulnerable, as if he

lacked his customary emotional armor. But whenever he looked at Benny he felt that he was on his way to some kind of happiness.

Kevin had said that Benny couldn't save him, but Ray knew that Benny was good for him. Last night Ray had let go of some of the fear that had shut down his feelings for years. He'd wanted Benny for as long as he'd known him. Wanting and pretending not to want had made him miserable, but last night—even with all his doubts and fears about being fucked, it had ended up being amazing. He'd never felt closer to anyone. Wouldn't Kevin agree that that was a good thing?

They took their time getting up and lingered over breakfast, talking about old times and people they knew and how things had changed. Ray even talked a little about his time in Vegas as the Bookman, telling a few stories about close calls and times he didn't get the support he needed from the Feds. He didn't talk about his daily life as Armando, though. It would have been embarrassing if Fraser knew much about the luxury he had lived in: the clothes, the house, the girls, and the casino life. Most of all, Ray didn't want to reveal who he'd been as Langoustini, how the ruthlessness of his role had become second nature and his own humanity had sometimes seemed to take a holiday. It made him nervous to think about that, as if he was holding something back. He excused his lapse by figuring he'd left that part of himself behind with the prison coveralls and the shackles and the little mustache. A new Ray Vecchio had risen from the corpse of the guy who'd been shot down on the steps of the courthouse, or so he hoped.

In return, Fraser talked about his time away, his job in a little town whose name Ray promptly forgot, up near the Arctic Circle. Most of the crimes he had had to deal with had involved poaching or feuds between neighbors, but he had a couple of interesting stories. By tacit and mutual consent, neither of them mentioned the fact that Kowalski had been living with Fraser through that whole year.

Suddenly, talking was like dancing around in a minefield. There were too many unapproachable subjects. Ray felt frustrated that their easy camaraderie of the old days had been replaced by this caution. Fraser looked wary every time he spoke, his eyes searching Ray's face. It made Ray wince to see that look in Fraser's eyes. Last night, after Fraser had fucked him, he had seemed like the happiest man in the world. Now he looked as if he was searching his conscience, wondering what he'd done wrong. Ray wondered if Fraser were responding to something in Ray's behavior, some doubt he wasn't even aware he was projecting.

Eventually they ended up discussing cases they had solved, and some that still lay open on the books. It was a safer subject than the time they had spent apart. Ironically, the time they were most comfortable together now was when there was physical contact between them instead of just words.

Once they had broached the subject of old cases, it followed that they would end up stopping by the precinct just to look at a couple of old files. Descending the stairs, Ray was returning to his desk with a cluster of dusty papers from Records when he saw a familiar figure standing in the hallway with her back to him. Surprised to see her back so soon, he stopped, hesitated, and then went forward to greet her.

"Stella," he said a little warily. She turned to face him and her wary smile seemed to mirror his. She was wearing a light brown suit and a white blouse—her usual uniform—so she must be back at work.

"Hello, Ray," she said evenly. Not too glad to see him and not too sorry. That was okay. Ray relaxed a little.

"When did you get back? Did it go okay with, you know, Stanley?"

Her eyes shifted away from his face

and looked back down the hall into the squad room. "Yeah, everything's fine," she said vaguely.

"Oh-kay," Ray said, drawing out the word. He knew when a woman had lost interest in his presence. "I guess I'll see you around, then, Stella." He started to walk past her when her glance suddenly snapped back to his face.

"I'm sorry, Ray, I was distracted," she said, running a hand over her hair. "Stanley's here. He's seeing Welsh."

Ray's pulse started to pound. "Stanley's talking to Welsh? Why? Is he asking to stay at the 27th?"

She shook her head. "No, but he needs Welsh to write a special recommendation. Something that says he did a good job during his assignment here. That year off hurt him," she added, "in more ways than one." Ray kept his eyes on her face and tried not to show any expression. "How have you been, Ray?" She kept glancing down the hall with a worried look.

"I'm all right," he said. "In fact, I'm good." Ray realized he was holding the dusty files against his Hawaiian shirt. Loosening his grip a little, he brushed himself off. "I think I'm better than I have been since I got back from Vegas." He knew he'd put his foot in it even before she glanced at him sharply. "I'm sorry, Stella. I didn't mean—" He stopped awkwardly. What exactly did he mean? What could he tell her about his life now?

Her eyes sized him up coolly. "Somebody messed up your face," she said.

"Yeah," Ray answered sheepishly. He couldn't think of anything he wanted to do less than tell Stella the story. "Got in a fight. In the line of duty, of course."

"If you say so." She gave a small snort of laughter. "Are you seeing someone?"

"Yeah," Ray said again. Warning bells went off in his head. He couldn't lie about it, but he wasn't going to tell her who. How the hell had a simple "hello" become so compli-

cated?

Unexpectedly, Stella smiled. "You look happy. At least you did a second ago."

"Yeah," Ray repeated, remembering to breathe. "I'm pretty good."

Stella took a deep breath. "Stanley and I—" she began.

"You got back together?" Ray asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

She nodded. "I meant to write you. It's just that the last time I saw you, things weren't too good."

Ray grinned at her. "The last time I saw you, I was a shit. I'm sorry I yelled at you like that and threw that cup and everything. I just lost it."

"So, you're okay with it?" Stella asked hesitantly. "We'll still have to work together sometimes, and I just wanted make sure that you weren't mad."

"Stell, we had some great times," Ray said, feeling a weight lift off his chest, "but you were right. It wasn't meant to be." This meant that Stanley hadn't come back for Fraser.

She stared at him, stunned. "Ray, I can't believe you. I thought you'd have a fit. I was standing here trying to find Stanley before you did so you wouldn't start a fight with him."

"You were?" Ray tried to think back to the time he and Kowalski had almost punched each other out right here in the office. He couldn't deny he'd been royally pissed off and jealous, but that had been over Fraser, and Ray had been the Bookman then. "Hey," he said, leaning in and patting her on the arm, "don't worry about that. Congratulations. I think you and that moron belong together."

She pulled away from him indignantly. "Ray!"

"Sorry." He chuckled and shook his head. "I got you, didn't I?"

She laughed, too, and punched him on the arm as they walked back towards

Ray's desk where Fraser was waiting for the files.

But at the moment he was standing there talking to Kowalski.

Sitting on the wrong side of Ray Vecchio's desk, Fraser heard Kowalski coming from across the bullpen and looked up from the files he was studying. He didn't turn, waiting in the hopes of composing his face. "Hey, Frase," Kowalski said in that high, nervous voice. Fraser stood and turned and edged over so that Vecchio's desk would make a barrier between them. Kowalski looked at him quizzically.

"Chill, Frase, it's not like I'm gonna jump your bones right here in the office," he said with a little hurt smile.

Fraser felt a blush spread from his collar to his scalp. "How are you, Ray? It's good to see you."

"You mean since I walked out into the tundra?" Kowalski shrugged. "I had a hell of a time just getting to the main road, and hitchhiking to Toronto was a bitch and a half. I thought I was gonna lose a couple of toes for sure after that walk. When I got there I didn't have any money left and I had to call Stella. But it ended up working out all right."

"I'm sorry." Fraser had thought about this moment since Ray had walked out on him. There was no way he could ever make up for the brusque way he had ended their relationship.

"For—?" Kowalski prompted.

Fraser decided the remark was disingenuous. Kowalski must be asking for a fuller apology, to which he was certainly entitled. "For what I said. For not wanting to continue our relationship." Kowalski still looked at him expectantly. "For leaving you."

Kowalski sighed and shook his head. "See, most guys, if someone walked out into the snow on them, they'd say that guy left them, but you—" He grinned. "You're right,

Fraser, you left me, and you did it for my own good, huh?"

"I'm afraid I did."

Kowalski planted both hands on the desk and leaned in towards Fraser, oblivious to the stack of files he dislodged in the process. "I get it now, Fraser. I was up there with you, I didn't know anybody, I didn't have a job. Hell, I couldn't make coffee without asking you for a pointer. And that's why I thought I was...gay, you know. But it turned out I wasn't." Fraser opened his mouth to answer, but Kowalski waved a hand in the air to stop him. "I thought it was what I wanted. You really know how to hypnotize a guy, you know? But it wasn't. I didn't know who the hell I was until I saw Stella again, and it all clicked back into place. And if she hadn't thought she'd lost me..." He laughed. "Maybe I should be thanking you for cutting me loose so I could figure it out for myself."

"It's true that you were too dependent on me, Ray," Fraser said, "and I..." How could he say this? That he had woken up one morning and realized with a clarity he couldn't ignore that his real desire was still in Chicago, and that he didn't even know if the man wanted him, and almost didn't care, but he'd known he had to leave?

"And you had some unfinished business here," Kowalski ended for him. "So, how's it going?"

"What?" Fraser asked nervously.

"Mr. Unfinished Business. You know, I shoulda known he'd get you in the end. He took two bullets for you, Fraser. I couldn't compete with that," Kowalski said, smiling. "Where is he?"

Fraser saw Ray, with Stella at his side, standing at Huey's desk, an expression of rage and jealousy on his face. Suddenly, he very much feared that Ray would become violent. "Behind you," Fraser said,

swallowing through a dry throat.

Stopping, Ray put the files down on the nearest surface, which happened to be Huey's desk, and just stood there staring. Kowalski had both hands on the desk—Ray's desk—and was explaining something earnestly to Fraser, while Fraser listened with his whole attention, his whole beautiful face focused on that little punk.

"So, this new woman of yours must really be something," Stella said teasingly. "I don't think you miss me at all." She looked at him, and he knew he should talk to her, keep walking, get his face back under control, but he just couldn't do it. "Jesus, Ray," she said softly, "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"It's true that you were too dependent on me, Ray," Fraser was saying. *Ray*. Of course. Fraser had called Kowalski 'Ray'. So, the night before, for every time Ray Vecchio had heard that throaty voice cry out his name in the heat of passion, Ray Kowalski had heard it a hundred times.

Glancing up, Fraser caught sight of Ray and smiled a warm, guileless, welcoming smile that couldn't be mistaken for anything except love. Ray felt the pull that he'd felt from the very beginning. Where that man was, he had to be. It scared him, and it calmed him down. He turned to Stella, but it was too late for damage control. She knew.

She was looking at him with surprise and even a little contempt. "I never would have figured that, Ray," she said quietly. "Not you, too."

"Don't talk about it like it's a disease, Stella," Ray said sharply. Leaving her, he walked up behind Kowalski who turned to face him.

"Hey, Vecchio," he said a little belligerently.

"Kowalski," said Ray without much warmth. "You here for a short visit? Don't let me keep you."

"Yeah. Yeah, I wanted to say hello to Fraser, but I'm, uh, I'm done now. I'll be over at the 18th again starting tomorrow. Maybe I'll see you around."

Ray opened his mouth and then caught a glimpse of Fraser's expression, poised between hope and disappointment, and he just couldn't say what he had intended to say. "Yeah, good luck," he said finally. "I'll see you around."

Kowalski held out a hand and Ray shook it, and Ray didn't notice when Stan and Stella left because all he could see was Fraser's relieved smile.

Ray drove moodily, making sharp turns that made Fraser hold on to the door handle and Dief whimper. Welsh had been right. He should have stayed out of the office until Monday. "So, what did Kowalski want?" he asked abruptly.

"He wanted to tell me that he was happy with Stella," Fraser said evenly.

"Is that so?" Ray asked. He wanted to know more, to ask for every detail, but he and Fraser had never talked much about feelings. He wondered if it had been any easier between Fraser and Kowalski. It pained him to think that Kowalski had been here first, had taught Fraser that self-confident way of loving that Ray had felt acted out on his body for the last few days.

"Yes," said Fraser, "he thanked me for breaking off our liaison."

Ray chuckled meanly at the word to cover up the barb the thought had sent through his heart. "And what did you say?"

"I apologized."

"Ain't that sweet?" Ray said mockingly.

"Ray, you have nothing to fear from Detective Kowalski."

Ray snorted. "You bet I don't. But let's call a spade a spade here. Let's quit with the 'Detective Kowalski' crap and call

the man what you always called him." Ray gripped the steering wheel hard as he drove mostly by instinct. He knew he should stop this, but he felt compelled to say the things he was saying. Even he didn't know how hurtful they would be until he heard them come out of his mouth. "What did you call him again?"

"You know I called him 'Ray.'" Fraser sounded hurt, but Ray wouldn't look at him.

"What about when you came, Benny, what did you call him then? Did you call him 'Ray' when you fucked him, Benny?"

Fraser was silent so long Ray thought he wasn't going to answer. When his voice came, it was soft and low. "I always called him 'Ray.'"

It was too much. Ray pulled over to the side of the road and stopped with a screech and a puff of evil-smelling smoke. "Dammit," he said, hitting the steering wheel. "God dammit to hell! I didn't want to know that!"

"Then why did you ask?" came Fraser's eminently reasonable voice.

Holding the steering wheel tightly, Ray leaned his forehead against his hands. What the hell was he doing? He was fucking everything up. It seemed as if they were getting deeper and deeper into a cesspool of jealousy and recriminations. Why couldn't he just forget the past and enjoy what he had?

"Don't make me deny my past, Ray," Fraser said.

Ray finally dared to look at him. "I'm sorry, Benny," he said softly. "I don't know why I said that. Him having my name—it just gets to me, you know? And when I think of you together—"

"When I call you 'Ray' it's a completely different name," Fraser said.

Ray snorted. "Sounds the same to me."

"But when I say someone's name I think of that person—his character traits, his appearance, his scent..."

"Scent? I have a scent?" Ray asked, indignant.

"Everyone has a scent."

"Maybe, yeah, but you don't have to talk about it," Ray said sullenly. "Anyway, you got me off track. I was saying that I don't like you calling him 'Ray.'"

"How many relationships have you had in your life, Ray?"

Ray shot him a look of disbelief. "I didn't count, Benny."

"What if I became jealous of all of them?"

Ray shook his head. "But that's different. That's—" He paused, thinking. "I see your point."

"Each of us is the sum total of our experience," Fraser said seriously. "Without all your experiences, you wouldn't be who you are."

"There are a couple I could have done without," Ray said darkly.

"And I, also," Fraser said.

Ray looked at him sharply. "Really, Benny? You?"

Fraser looked into his eyes. "You lived through one of them with me."

Victoria. The very thought of her tapped into a deep reservoir of pain that Ray still held inside him. "'The price of the good stuff is the hurt,'" he said softly, thinking of Kevin.

"Ray?"

He sighed. "My shrink told me that. Maybe he's right."

"He sounds like a very wise man," Fraser said. He was staring down at his hat as his fingers edged around the brim. Ray looked at him hard as if he were suddenly a stranger. This man had hurt him as much as anyone ever had. As much as Pop, as much as Ange or Irene. But maybe he hadn't meant to. Did Fraser ever feel as empty and purposeless as Ray did? Maybe he was just seeking something to fill up the void in his life, just like Ray, just like everybody. If only Ray could let go of his jealousy, maybe they could make something work between them.

Ray shook his head to clear it. His anger was fading into the background, but he knew it hadn't gone for good. They needed to talk.

Ray put the car in gear and slid off the brake. He suddenly felt much calmer. "Let's go home, Benny," he said, and pulled away from the curb.

It felt strange being home in the early afternoon. For lack of anything else to do, Ray made some coffee, and they sat at the dining room table to drink it. Ray had always thought that if he could only touch Benny everything would be all right. It was strange how all the emotional baggage didn't fade away just because they were lovers. Staring into his coffee, Ray knew he should have known better. How many times was he going to make the same mistake? Sex didn't solve all your problems, in fact it created new ones. When he'd been with Ange, they always used to make love after a fight instead of talking it out and they never solved anything. Once, when things were especially bad, they'd thought about having a baby, as if that would make everything all right. Thank god they hadn't been that stupid.

"What are you thinking, Ray?" Fraser asked hesitantly.

Ray looked up, ready to say "nothing," but when he saw the appeal in Benny's eyes he told the truth. "About my ex-wife," he said. "About how everything fell apart even though the sex was good."

"Do you think we're falling apart?"

"God, no, Benny, I hope not. But I think we have some stuff to work out."

"Is there something you want to ask me, Ray?"

Ray considered. Hell, yeah, there was. All about Victoria, for one thing. But he hesitated to open that can of worms right now. There was plenty to say about what had happened between himself and Benny, or what had happened to them separately during their

year apart. Maybe that was where to begin.

"Lots of things," he said. "What about you?"

Fraser nodded, but he didn't speak.

They were silent for a moment. "It isn't easy, is it, Benny?" Ray decided to try to talk through something that had bothered him for a long time, something less explosive than Victoria or Kowalski. "So, Benny," Ray said finally, "tell me about the fire at my house. What happened that day?"

Fraser's face fell. "We couldn't keep up with her," he said softly. "I felt so stupid later when I figured out what was going on. Detective Kowalski figured it out, actually, but only after we'd lost your car and my building. By the time I got over to the house, the fire department was there. I went in to get Francesca and Tony..."

"And the fish tank, I hear," Ray said, wanting to lighten the somber expression on Fraser's face.

Fraser looked at him with guilt in his eyes. "It was my fault, Ray. I should have seen sooner what was happening. I should have—"

"It was—" Ray began and then stopped. He had been about to say that it was his fault, but wasn't Kevin right? If he'd been there he might have been able to do something to help, but it certainly wasn't his fault that a couple of crazy people had conspired to burn down his family home. "It was Zoltan Motherwell's fault," he said firmly, "not yours. And his girlfriend set the fire. Not everything is in your control, Benny."

Fraser was looking at him strangely, a little smile on his lips. "You're right, Ray. I suppose it's just wishful thinking. People want to think they control everything, so when something goes wrong they have to take the blame, too."

"Thank you for saving Frannie," Ray said seriously.

Fraser flushed. "You know you don't have to thank me, Ray."

Ray shrugged and smiled at him. "You risked your life."

"Detective Kowalski also did his best to watch over your family while you were gone," Fraser said hesitantly. "I know how much your family means to you. Perhaps someday you should thank him. He's a good man, Ray."

Inside Ray's chest, it seemed as if a fist suddenly clenched. It didn't feel good to hear Fraser say those words. Just as he started to drop his guard, Fraser had to hit him with Kowalski again. "You always see the good in people. Even in me." Ray smiled dangerously. "But I guess the guy's a real saint, huh, Benny? Out of my league."

Fraser's mouth moved silently with unsaid words, his eyes uncertain. "Well, I wouldn't exactly say that—oh, were you being sarcastic, Ray?"

Ray's lip curled in scorn. Poor Fraser. Throw him a little sarcasm and it was like pushing him into quicksand. "Yeah, but you know what? I don't want to talk about Kowalski anymore. I never want to hear the name 'Kowalski' again. But what I do want..." Old habits die hard. All Ray wanted right now was to get his hands on Benny and go to bed. "Benny..." he said imperiously.

"Yes, Ray?" Fraser was looking at him strangely, painfully, as if he knew what Ray was about to ask but wanted to hear it anyway.

"I want you, Benny," Ray said, his voice hard with lust and anger. He knew this was wrong, but he wanted it anyway. His mind raced ahead, picturing them naked in each other's arms, picturing all the things he wanted to do. All his thoughts about Kowalski and Victoria had focused Ray's desire. He wanted to fuck Benny, but not the way Benny had taken him—as an act of possession that just involved the two of them. Ray wanted to possess Benny to wipe away the trace of those other bodies that had been there before him.

"Understood," Fraser said, rising from

his chair as if compelled by Ray's words.

Ray rose to meet him and pulled him close for a kiss.

Their mouths were good together, and moving his tongue around in Fraser's soft mouth was making him hot. Ray's hands unbuttoned Fraser's shirt so that his mouth could trace a wet line of kisses down his chest. Fraser put his face down to Ray's head and inhaled deeply against his scalp. Ray shuddered with need. He wanted Benny skin to skin with him, and he wanted it now.

"I want to fuck you, Benny," he said roughly, feeling Benny's ass with both hands, squeezing it hard enough to hurt. "Do you want me?"

"Yes, Ray," Fraser said against his neck. "But I think we—"

"I want you in bed," Ray said tightly. "Take off your clothes and wait for me there."

"Very well, Ray," Fraser said. There was an uncertain look in Fraser's eyes as if he was leaving something unsaid. Ray ignored it. He wanted to devour that mouth, not hear words come out of it.

Fraser went as soon as Ray released him and Ray watched him go with a violent thrill of mastery. By the time he found the lubricant in the living room where they had dropped it the night before, Fraser was lying in bed naked waiting for him, and what a vision that was. As Ray undressed, he grinned with the anticipation of running his hands over that gorgeous body. He really hadn't had a chance to look Fraser over from a distance before. Benny's body was almost hairless, the skin paler than his face. Against the whiteness, the Ray saw the darker scars—the knife wound in the thigh, the otter teeth near the collarbone—and many he didn't recognize. Fraser's history was written on his body as Ray's was on his.

Laying his body down on Fraser's he

sighed with pleasure. Ray was in control now, his mouth bearing down on Fraser's, his hands on Fraser's chest. He was a machine, programmed for one action and determined to carry it out. He made love to Fraser efficiently and single-mindedly, acting and responding perfectly. It wasn't that he didn't feel—in fact he was incredibly excited, looking forward to the moment when he could push inside. He didn't just hope that Fraser was responding to him, he knew with his flesh, with his nerve endings, with each touch of his skin against Fraser's that Fraser needed him.

They were both hard and ready. Fraser was taking everything Ray gave and responding helplessly. His face was flushed down his neck to his chest and he breathed hard, his eyes half-closed. Ray could see the effect he was having, see how profoundly Fraser wanted him. It felt good after all this time of thinking it was wrong to see how right it really was.

"Roll over, Benny," he whispered. He would take Fraser from behind, as he had been taken. He wanted to feel Fraser's ass against him. He wanted to be able to move freely, to pound in as Benny offered himself.

Benny rolled onto his stomach, and Ray lay against him, molding his body around the curve of Benny's ass. He felt so good. Ray rubbed up against him and bit his shoulders. Benny groaned, arching his back. Kneeling over him, Ray ran his hands down the curve of Benny's back, and then he saw it.

He'd always known the bullet wound was there, but he hadn't seen it since it was new. It was just a small depression now, shiny with scar tissue, but Ray knew that the bullet was still in there somewhere, lurking near Benny's spine. Ray's stomach clenched with anguish as it had that winter afternoon when he stood on the icy platform, hearing the rush of trains, his fingers still tingling from the recoil, at the moment he first realized he had shot Benny.

His fingertips feathered over the small,

round smudge, and it seemed that the skin was cooler here than on the rest of Benny's body. Ray stopped, arrested in the act of touching Fraser's wound, his own handiwork.

"Is there something wrong, Ray?" Fraser asked quietly.

"Yeah, Benny, there is," Ray said in shock, and the name made Fraser a person again, not just the object of Ray's angry desire. *Jesus, Ray thought, you'd think I'd learn something after all these years. What the hell am I doing?*

"It was a long time ago, Ray," Fraser said.

"Yeah, I know, but... God, I fucked up. How could I miss like that?" Ray's arousal had faded, leaving him with despair. He had fucked up and he was fucking up now. He laid his face against the scar. "Does it hurt?" he whispered, kissing the thickened skin.

"Sometimes," Benny said softly.

Ray closed his eyes. There was nothing he could do. "Benny, I'm sorry," he said, knowing it was stupidly easy to say that.

"You were shooting at a moving target," Fraser said patiently. "You missed."

"I hit the Riv's gas tank while my hands were shaking," Ray said, rolling aside to let Fraser up. "What the hell was the matter with me that day? I could have shot Victoria. I could have killed the bitch. She'd never bother us again."

"She didn't have a gun. And she never did bother us again."

"That doesn't mean she won't," Ray snapped. "Sometimes I picture her out there, waiting for the right moment to come and take you away with her." He stopped suddenly, aware that what he had said made him seem vulnerable. They sat on the bed facing each other. Ray felt a cold stab of fear as if Benny were slipping away as they spoke. He suppressed the urge to take his

friend by the arm and hold onto him hard.

"She won't."

"How the hell do you know?"

"I wouldn't go." Fraser was looking solidly into his eyes as if willing him to believe. "And, besides, she's done with me," Fraser continued quietly. "She wanted to ruin me, to destroy my life, kill Dief and make you hate me, and then—"

"I could never—" Ray started quickly, then paused, not entirely sure it was true.

Fraser looked down at his hands. "You'd still be in prison," he said brutally, but Ray knew Fraser meant the brutality, not for Ray, but for himself.

"Benny," he began, running one hand lightly down Fraser's arm. "I didn't—"

"And then," Fraser continued stubbornly, "she wanted to make me collude in all that by being her lover, by staying with her day by day. And I would hardly have had a choice but to stay with her once I left that platform. I would have had to choose between remaining with her and turning us both in. Then I would have had to face you and your family, and Dief, if he was alive. I would have been court-martialed, drummed out of the service. And everyone I had called my friend would never have trusted me again, and all my enemies, the ones who thought I made the wrong choice about the dam, would have shaken their heads knowingly and said that they always knew I had a price, they just hadn't been able to meet it."

Ray couldn't take his eyes off Fraser. He wanted to speak, to stop the bitter words pouring from his friend's mouth, but he felt paralyzed with awe, as if a window had just opened up into this soul that had been inscrutable for so long. He knew he must look like a wide-eyed fool, but he didn't care. "Jesus, Benny," he said. "I had no idea."

"I know you thought you saw a gun in her hand, Ray," Fraser continued, his voice breaking. "But at the time I knew there was no gun, so I imagined that you had been aiming at

me. When I woke up in the hospital and I couldn't move I thought you had shot me on purpose, and I could hardly blame you."

Ray's chest was tight with anxiety, but he knew he had to speak. "When I saw you go down on that platform, I couldn't believe it. I was frantic. I didn't sleep until they told me you were going to make it, and when I did, I had horrible dreams. In the hospital I didn't know what to do. I would have done anything to take it back, anything."

"Ray—"

"No. I can't believe you thought I could shoot you down like that. That I could mean it. Oh, man." He took Fraser's face into both hands and looked into his eyes. "If they'd taken my house because of you, I would have held it against you. I might have hated you for a while, who knows. But I would never have shot you. What do you think I am?"

"It's not what I think you are, Ray. It's what I thought I deserved."

It hurt. Ray closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against Fraser's. "No, Benny," was all he could say. "Never that."

For all this time they had avoided talking about the past, and they had been close to putting it off again. They'd had the whole year after Victoria left to work it through, but Ray had closed down emotionally, using his anger at being abandoned as an excuse, and then he'd gone undercover. And now he had tried to use sex as a way to smooth things over.

"Jeez, Benny, I've hurt you so bad," he said, feeling lost.

"You've saved my life many times, Ray," Fraser said softly, his lips near Ray's. "You intercepted two bullets that were meant for me."

Ray pulled back to look at Fraser. "Yeah, I could do that, but I couldn't talk to you. I was mad that whole year after Victoria. Nothing ever seemed right

between us again. I was mad, and I wanted you."

"And you didn't trust me," Fraser said. His voice was thick, his eyes sad. Ray wanted to take that sadness away, but instead he decided to tell the truth.

"No," he said levelly. "I didn't trust you."

They looked at each other for the space of a few heartbeats.

"Do you trust me now?" Fraser asked hesitantly.

"I—" Ray stopped short, biting off his knee-jerk answer. Did he? "You left me," he said, forcing out the words. "You left me twice. Maybe that's why I was rushing us along just now. I guess I thought if I didn't make it with you fast I might never get the chance."

"You left me, too, Ray."

"Yeah," Ray said, looking down at his lap. "Twice." He looked up and met Fraser's eyes. "Well, aren't we a couple of fucked up guys?"

He saw the counterpart of his thin smile on Fraser's face. The fist of anger inside his chest slowly unclenched, leaving him drained. He looked at his friend and he saw a man as uncertain and fallible as he was. It was as if he'd been seeing Benny through some kind of filter all this time, putting him on a pedestal and then blaming him for what was wrong between them.

Victoria and Kowalski were out of the picture. It was time for Ray and Benny to stop making excuses and try to get it right. Ray suddenly felt closer to Benny than he ever had. Lying back against the pillows, he stretched an arm out as an invitation. Fraser gave him a questioning look. There was caution behind his eyes that made Ray breathe out sharply. Benny was a little afraid of him, just like everyone else.

"Come on, Benny," he said as gently as he could. "We're gonna work it out."

A second later, Fraser settled against his side with one arm over Ray's chest. It was

warm in the room with the afternoon sunshine beating against the closed curtains. Ray felt exhausted and suddenly drowsy. Pulling Fraser tighter against him, he arranged himself into a more comfortable position.

"Sometimes I just can't stop, Benny, you know?" Ray said softly. "I'm sorry." He felt Fraser's breath against his neck.

"You have no need to be jealous, Ray."

Ray let those words wash over him for a moment.

"I know, Benny," he said finally.

They spent the rest of the week together, lost in their own world. They walked by the lake, made simple meals, and spent many more hours a day in bed than were strictly necessary for sleep. They talked more comfortably now, and the silences between them gradually stopped feeling so tense. Ray felt better. His injuries were healing, and he dared to think hopefully of the future for the first time in a couple of years. He was even beginning to let himself believe that his life had some meaning, some purpose. All the questions—When would Fraser be reinstated? What would happen if Ray's family or colleagues found out about them?—were put aside for the moment while they healed their wounds.

On the following Monday morning, Ray went back to work at the 27th with Fraser at his side. The women made a fuss over Fraser, of course, which caused Ray a few bad moments until he saw how uncomfortable Benny looked with several pairs of feminine hands brushing over his shoulders and chest. If they only knew. Ray chuckled to himself and went to his desk to sort through the tottering pile of folders there.

When Fraser joined him, flushed red

and tugging at his collar, Ray wordlessly handed him a pile of paper to go through. Fraser nodded and set to work.

It reminded Ray of the way things had been before, that first year they'd known each other. They communicated without speaking, knowing through a gesture or a look what the other was thinking. Only now things were better. Ray felt as if he knew this man completely, and the feeling made him happier and more self-confident than even being the Bookman, with all his power, had ever made him.

The summer days lengthened. It was unbearably hot in the precinct, so they sought reasons to go out into the field. At night, they took long walks near the water in that strange deep blue Chicago twilight that seemed to last for hours. They slept without covers. On the weekends, they spent a few hours working on the Riv. Ray enjoyed showing Fraser things he didn't know, although of course he understood the fundamentals of the internal combustion engine from having read a repair manual at his grandparents' library. Together, they rebuilt the carb and the engine and started on the body, painstakingly scraping the flower decals off the sides, only to find that the paint would have to be sandblasted off before it would take a new coat. Hating solvents and paint more than anything except cigarettes, Ray gave up and took it to a vehicle restoration place that cost him an arm and a leg, but left the car looking brand new. It looked so good he was almost afraid to use it when he was on duty. It was only a matter of time before the windows got shot out.

The long days of Indian Summer brought flocks of geese heading south from Canada over the lake. And it was during one of those bright, calm days that Fraser received a registered letter from Ottawa saying that Constable Benton Fraser was reinstated in the R.C.M.P. with all the duties and privileges accorded to his rank, and that he was requested to report for duty at a small post near the

Arctic Circle in 14 days time. It was a three-day journey from Chicago: one day by plane, and two days by four-wheel-drive or dogsled, depending on the weather.

Ray knew when he saw Fraser's face. He had no need to read the black type on the cool, linen paper with the crest at the top, but he took it into his hand anyway.

"When?" he asked tersely.

"I would have to leave in ten days," Fraser said calmly, but his eyes told a different story. He took hold of the letter and pulled it from Ray's grasp. "I won't go," he said, turning away to reach for the telephone.

Ray hesitated and then jumped after him, taking him by the arm and pulling him back around. "What do you mean, you won't go, Benny? It's your career."

"There are other things in life," Fraser said vaguely.

"You love that job more than anything," Ray said, stunned.

"There are things I care about more," Fraser said, but his face looked pale, his jaw set.

Ray took him by the shoulders and looked into his eyes. "You're afraid I'll go apeshit if you leave, aren't you, Benny?"

The flicker in Fraser's eyes told Ray he had hit on the truth. "Well, I..."

"You've gotta go," Ray said. "Jeez, Benny, I'm not that insecure. Of course, you'd better come back. I learned something from the Bookman. I'll break your kneecaps if you leave me for good."

Fraser regarded him uncertainly.

"Just kidding, Benny."

"Ah," said Fraser, nodding as if he'd known all the time but was just checking to be sure. "Yes, of course."

They sat together in the flower-power Riv in the dark parking structure. They weren't all that early, but neither of

them wanted to make the move to open the door and say good-bye. Dief whined in the back seat.

"You should have done that before we got in the car," Fraser said, sighing. He opened the door and bent the seat forward enough for Dief to get out. "Don't go far. We'll miss our plane."

"I can't believe they called you so soon," Ray said, tracing a crack in the steering wheel with one finger. "We hardly had any time."

"We'll have time."

"We could have had more. We should have been together for years. I screwed it all up."

"You weren't ready," Fraser said quietly.

"You were."

Fraser nodded. "I'll have a month of leave accumulated in six months. I have to pass probation before I can take it."

Ray snorted. "Imagine the nerve of them putting *you* on probation."

"I was suspended, Ray. It's a rule."

"Yeah, well, rules can be bent. But it doesn't matter. Look, Benny, I already have five weeks of vacation saved up. I could come up there in January and then again in spring or summer. We could finally rebuild that cabin."

"Is that what you want to do on your vacation?"

"Sure. I'll come in late July, early August. It's warm then, right?"

"Relatively."

Ray chuckled. "Remember when I gave you that power saw? I had no idea what it was like up there. I mean, I'd been there, but I wasn't thinking."

"We could use a generator," Fraser suggested.

"Nah. You can show me how to do it the old fashioned way. Nice and slow. And no air pollution."

"We don't have to rebuild the cabin, Ray," Fraser said gently. "We can just go camping."

Ray laughed again. "Oh, no you don't. I want that cabin, see, because I don't always want to be lying outside with the bugs and the bears when I stay with you, not to mention the snow. I say we rebuild it. I might be spending a lot of time up there in the next few years."

"Or you might not," Fraser said.

"What do you mean?" Ray was startled. "Why wouldn't I?"

Fraser looked at him. "Because I requested a transfer to Chicago as soon as my probationary period is over."

"You think you'll get it?"

"Yes."

"Benny, that's—" Ray paused. "That's not really what you want to do, is it? I mean, you don't want to live permanently in Chicago any more than I wanna to live in Lots-a-luck-yuck."

"I was home for a year. I can stand Chicago for a while."

"I can't let you do that for me," Ray said firmly. "It's not what you want to do."

"It's not your decision, Ray."

Ray felt chastened. Fraser was right. "All right, Benny. It's—" He smiled suddenly. How could he refuse? It was a gift, and it was what he wanted. *Relax. Accept it.* "I'll come up in December or January—hey, maybe we can meet in Ottawa or something—and then in spring you'll be back here."

"If all goes well."

"Yeah. Let's hope." He slid over on the seat and put his arms around Fraser. "Hey, Benny, do you mind if I don't go in?" They held each other briefly and then Ray pulled away. "I'll see you in two months. Call me."

Fraser got out, pulling his duffel bag from the back seat just as Dief ran up. He looked Ray in the eyes one more time and then walked away without looking back.

Ray watched him go, thinking how proud Fraser looked to be wearing his

uniform again. He held himself extra straight and walked at a military pace. When he reached the door to the stairs, he held it open for Dief and then disappeared inside.

Ray sighed and reached for the ignition. Looking up, he caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror. Nothing special, just a middle-aged guy who had a couple of lonely months ahead of him. He imagined Benny waiting in line at the airline counter, putting Dief into his carrier, checking his duffel bag. A big hole seemed to open up under Ray's heart.

"No," he murmured. It was when he felt the emptiness expand inside that the Bookman crept up on him. When he felt abandoned he got vindictive and paranoid, and he didn't feel anything but anger. No love, no empathy. It really felt as if there were another guy in there, pulling the strings. He shuddered. With or without Fraser, that wasn't who he wanted to be anymore.

"So he's gone?"

Ray looked at his shoes. Kevin's question felt like a reproach. "Yeah. He left Wednesday." He glanced up, missing something. "Aren't you going to ask how that makes me feel?" Kevin smiled. "Okay," Ray said, chuckling, "I guess I'm trained now. Actually, I feel like shit. I miss him so much I can hardly stand to go home. I haven't told anyone else this except you. It's funny—the only one I know might who understand how I feel is Kowalski. We're gonna have a drink next week."

"Without Stella?"

"Oh, yeah," Ray said, smiling. "She doesn't get it that her guys went for Fraser. Two in a row. That would be hard to take, I guess."

"Did you talk to Kowalski yet?"

"Not much. He dropped by for a meeting and he just asked me out for a drink. I think Fraser called him before he left. I guess he was looking out for me, wanted me to have

a friend."

"That's good."

"Yeah." Ray paused, trying to figure out how to say what he felt. "I guess so. I guess it's good that Fraser want us to make peace. But I don't know if it will help. It's just that I feel so empty. It's like Fraser was never here, like it never happened."

Kevin nodded. "But it did. What are you afraid of? Do you trust him to come back?"

Ray nodded impatiently. "Sure, I do, but somehow I feel like I did before he left. I'm afraid I'll pitch a fit and let Kowalski have it. I'm afraid I'll rough up another perp without even thinking about it."

"You feel out of control." The matter-of-fact way Kevin said it made Vecchio feel a little silly.

"Yeah, sometimes."

"Just the fact that you're conscious of having those feelings will help you keep from acting them out, don't you think?" Kevin picked up a pencil from his blotter and started spinning it between two fingers.

"I don't know," Ray said, shifting his feet. "I've always felt a little like that. I always had a temper. It just got worse after I was the Bookman. I couldn't control it at all sometimes when I was Armando. I felt like I shouldn't have to."

"Maybe it would help to talk about what happens in your head when you have violent impulses. You never really told me what happened when you roughed up that suspect," Kevin said slowly. "All I know is that it was the incident that got you sent to me. Do you feel like talking about it now?"

Malatesta cringed back into his chair. "You gotta believe me," he said. "You and me, we're from the same neighborhood. My ma sees your family at the store. We even got the same name, you and me. You were friends with my brother, right? You gotta—"

Ray felt cold anger sheet through him. "Your brother was a faggot and I hated him just like everyone else," he said quietly. "And I don't gotta do nothing." Taking Malatesta by the arm, Ray dragged him out of his chair and slammed him into the wall with his arm twisted behind him. "You're not like me. You're nothing like me, you and your cocksucker brother. Don't you talk about my mother. You hear me? You hear?"

Malatesta was screaming and sobbing, pleading with Ray to let go of his arm, but Ray hardly heard him. He twisted harder, and right when he pulled Malatesta's head back to slam it into the wall, there was a rush of air and strong hands were yanking them apart.

Ray rubbed a hand across his head. He really didn't want to talk about this, but he was going to force himself this time. "Shit, you know, it was because of what he said about his brother." He took out a linen handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"I can see it's making you nervous, Ray. What did he say?"

Ray sighed. "This ain't gonna make me look so good. See, I went to high school with the guy's brother, and he was gay. I didn't beat him up or anything, but I wouldn't exactly say I stood up for him when everyone else gave him a hard time."

"Go on." Kevin's face had become expressionless.

"The kid—the perp, I mean—his name was Raymond, just like me. And he said that his mom knew my mom, that I went to school with his brother and all that. You know, he knew he'd blown it and he was begging me. Usually I just ignore that kind of crap, but this—it got to me." Ray could feel the sweat gathering on the back of his neck and under his arms.

"Why do you suppose that was?" Kevin was looking as if he already knew.

"Okay," Ray continued without meeting Kevin's eyes, "because I didn't want to be associated with the guy's brother. The gay guy. It scared me to death."

"Who taught you to hate gays, Ray?"

Ray snorted. "My old man. He taught me to hate just about everybody, including myself, whatever I was. That's why I fit so well with Armando, like a hand in a glove. I told you once before, Pop would have loved it if I had turned out like the Bookman. That guy, to him, was a real success."

"Who was Armando?" Kevin was looking at him intently.

"Huh?" Ray asked, confused. "You know who he was."

"Humor me. Just describe him the way you saw him—the way you think he looked to people, who he was inside."

Ray frowned. "All right," he said slowly. He felt impatient with these games. He wanted help, and Kevin was playing twenty questions. "What good is that gonna do?"

"You'll see. Take your time." Kevin looked a little smug and Ray suddenly hated him for it. What the fuck was he up to? A little breath of paranoia teased at Ray's mind. "Ray?" Kevin asked tentatively. "Is something wrong?"

Ray exhaled sharply. "Yeah. I don't want to play games here. This is getting really irritating."

"I can tell. Listen, I know this might sound weird, but sometimes when something irritates us it's because we're getting close to a touchy spot, to something that would help us if we looked more closely at it, even though it might hurt. Does that make sense?"

Ray shrugged uneasily. "I guess so."

"Come on. Humor me."

Ray nodded sharply and turned his mind to the task. It seemed so easy, but it wasn't, really. Who the hell *was* Armando Langoustini? He thought back to the day when Fraser had walked into that Chicago hotel room and blown Langoustini away

with a word, Ray's real name. And what had Ray said to him...?

"For a full year I'm deep undercover, never waiting in line, always getting the best tables at the best restaurants. I live in a nine-thousand-square-foot adobe house at the edge of the desert, with a butler named Nero who brings me buttermilk night and day, and everywhere I go I sit in the back of a black limousine, and all this, all this, you wipe out with one word?"

Jesus, had those words really come out of Ray's own mouth? Langoustini really was a pretentious bugger, with his little mustache and his delusions of grandeur, his adobe house, and his stupid buttermilk. Showgirls and prostitutes only fucked him because he paid them so well. What did he have in his life? Money, fear, and a butler named Nero. A family of people who were scared to death of him. So what? He had been a dead man long before he died in that raid.

"He was a phony," Ray said suddenly, surprising himself. "A guy who thought he was something, but he was nothing. An empty shell. He had power and money, but he wasn't going to be really happy for one minute in his whole lousy life."

"That's sad," said Kevin simply.

Vecchio laughed. "Sad? I wouldn't describe it that way. He was what he wanted to be."

"What about you when you played him? Were you who you wanted to be?"

Ray looked at him in shock. That question went right to his heart. "No," he said softly. "Just after I got shot at the courthouse, when I was on my way back to the Bureau, I started thinking how life as Armando was kind of like a prison. With all that he had, he really didn't have a lot of freedom. I don't know if it was sad for him or not, but, shit, it was sad for me."

"Then why do you keep going back there?" Kevin asked seriously. "Why do you

want to be the Bookman?"

"I don't," Ray said. He was still sweating, and this conversation hurt deep down in his gut and high in his chest where the adrenaline was making his heart race.

"Can you release him, then? Can you say good-bye to the Bookman?"

"I keep trying to," Ray said in anguish. "I keep thinking I have. I have to change if I want to keep Fraser. I know that. It's just—"

Kevin was watching him intently. "What?"

"I can never be what Fraser is. He's so...good. There's no other way to describe it. He taught me a lot, and things looked different—you know?—when he came into my life. I cared about my work again. I wasn't so cynical. Well, I was still cynical, but I didn't always mean it. And I cared about people more. He pulled me out of my little self, my family, my trouble, my bullshit.

"You looked at things from a broader perspective."

"Yeah, something like that. But I still feel like he's so much better than me. I couldn't be him in a million years." He paused, thinking, and Kevin watched him silently. "Did I ever tell you that Fraser tried to get in to see me in jail?"

"What do you mean, he tried? What happened?"

"They told me my stockbroker was there to see me—my stockbroker, can you beat that? And I don't know who it is, but I figure it's someone from the Bureau, so I go. I walk into the visitors' room, and I'm disgusting, you know? Filthy, unshaven, all beat up. I spent a week in solitary with a concussion lying in my own puke. Now I'm considered a high-risk inmate because I had a freakin' fight, so I'm loaded down with chains like I'm Jack the Ripper. And I walk in there and I look through the glass, and I see Fraser, right? And he's wearing a suit

and tie that's at least ten years out of style—he must have got it at the Salvation Army—and his hair is slicked back, his face is so gorgeous, and he breaks into a smile when he sees me. I turned around and walked out. I told them never to let him in again. I snarled at them like a dog."

"Why?" Kevin asked simply.

"Because it made me think of a picture in the catechism when I was a kid. I hadn't thought of it in years and all of a sudden it came back to me. Gabriel crushing Lucifer. Gabriel is all sweetness and light—he's glowing and he's beautiful. But Lucifer is all ugly and twisted and he's falling into the flames of hell. Which is where I was. Which is where I figured I belonged. Fraser wanted to help me, but just by being there he made me feel terrible."

"You couldn't accept his help."

"I kept feeling he was doing it out of pity."

"But he wasn't, was he?"

"No. He left someone for me. He really cared. But, Christ, I was a mess. I didn't want him to see me like that. And I didn't want him to ruin his life for my sake. I didn't want to take that responsibility."

"Why would being with you, or helping you, ruin his life?"

"Because I ain't worth it." The answer came out of Ray's mouth so fast, his brain hadn't even engaged. He sat there stunned, wondering why he'd said it. Did he really believe that about himself, or was that his pop talking?

There was silence between them for a moment.

Ray figured he knew what was coming out of Kevin's mouth next, but Kevin surprised him.

"So, who is Benton Fraser?" Kevin asked suddenly, and Ray knew what he was asking this time. "Is he really all that perfect?"

"Oh, man. There's no one like him in the world. He always tries to do the right thing,

and I know that, even when I don't agree with him. So I take things from him that I would never take from anyone else, but sometimes I don't listen to him like I should." He thought of the night Irene died, how Fraser had tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen.

Fraser was trying to help him, trying to make him see. His face was within inches of Ray's own as Fraser held him firmly against the side of the van.

"You're so full of hate, Ray, all you can see is Zuko. That's all you've been able to see right from the beginning, but do you hate him enough to let the real killer walk free as a consequence?"

"Get off me," Ray snarled, and shoved him away.

"You seem distracted, Ray."

"Yeah, I was just thinking about Irene. I told you about that night. Fraser tried to stop me from running in there, but I wouldn't listen. Who knows, maybe if I had, she'd still be alive." Ray hung his head and fell silent. He wondered why Kevin was dragging him through all this. What was the use of dwelling on his failures?

"There's no use blaming yourself for that, Ray," Kevin said. "You were trying to protect her."

"I know," Ray said. "Sometimes I just keep trying to twist things around in my head even when they're over. I must have too much time on my hands." He smiled briefly, but he still felt the pain of that night. Maybe someday he could let it go, but not today. He looked up suddenly at Kevin as a thought struck him. "The thing that gets me is, how come Fraser could see it when I couldn't? He got what was going on with Zuko's guys, and he risked his life to fix it. At the time I just wanted him to follow me, right or wrong, because he was my friend. And it hurt

when he didn't.

"He has this code of honor, or something. Maybe it's a Mountie thing, I don't know. And it comes first, before me, before anything. Like, he won't talk about certain things."

"Hey, you ever done it in the shower, Benny?"

"Ah," Fraser began uncomfortably. "Well, you see, Ray... That is, I..."

Ray was sorry right away that he had asked. "It's okay, Benny. You don't have to tell me. I don't really want to know. It was a rhetorical question."

Somehow this didn't help. "It's just that if I told you I had or I hadn't, you'd know with whom I had done—or not done—such things, because of my limited, uh, experience, and...and that wouldn't be right."

"So don't tell me, Benny. Like I said, I don't wanna know. I don't really want to think about you with anyone else, to tell you the truth. I just want you to do it with me in the shower."

"Actually, I don't suppose it would do any harm to tell you that I haven't," Fraser said slowly, as if considering all the possibilities.

Ray laughed. "Benny, you're a real gentleman, but you're taking it a little too far. Believe me, I'm never gonna ask what you did do with Kowalski."

"He seems so innocent," Ray said, looking down and shaking his head, "that sometimes I don't think he knows what he's talking about. And then the next minute he surprises me with something he knows or can do that's totally amazing."

Kevin looked quizzical. "Maybe it's just me—maybe if I knew him it would be different—but it sounds like that could get tiresome."

Ray laughed. "Yeah. I used to call him the most annoying man in the world. But that was mostly because sometimes he wouldn't say what he thought. Sometimes he'd make me feel guilty or wrong just by saying, "Ah!" That

weird little "Ah!" could make me depressed for days. It used to make me so mad. And then these things would come up, like I found out one night he spoke Chinese. And he can read lips. And he's an expert marksman. Jesus."

Kevin put down the pencil and cocked his head to one side quizzically. "Come on, the man's human, right? He has to have flaws. Didn't you ever see him make a mistake?"

"Yeah," Ray said slowly, "one big one. I told you the story. It all ended when I shot him."

"He almost ran off with that woman and left you in the lurch."

"Yeah." The sadness Ray always felt when he talked about Victoria came over him. "She really had him bamboozled."

"Fraser made a mistake," Kevin said.

Ray started to get upset. "But Victoria—"

Kevin held up both hands, palms out. "It doesn't matter what she did. She manipulated him—both of you. But you didn't fall for it and he did. He made a mistake."

"What's your point? That Fraser's not perfect?"

Kevin nodded. "He's not. And you don't have to be perfect either."

"No worry about that," Ray said, shaking his head.

"I bet there are lots of things you're better at than he is," Kevin continued.

Ray snorted. "Name one."

"No, you name one."

"Okay, okay." Ray grinned in spite of himself. "There's a couple of things. He's terrible at undercover work. And I'm too good." His smile faded. "He isn't so smooth with women, but they love him anyway. Maybe that's why. I know a lot more about cars than he does."

"Anything else?"

Ray shrugged. "You know, now that

I think of it, he did make a couple of mistakes. But he made them for the right reasons. I mean, he was trying so hard to help someone that he ended up hurting them."

"Can you elaborate on that?" Kevin asked, frowning.

"One time in his old neighborhood there was a creep who was robbing old people right after they got their Social Security checks. Fraser got the idea to organize a kind of 'Neighborhood Watch' thing, so we dressed the old folks up in orange vests and gave them walkie-talkies."

"What happened?"

"It was kind of complicated, but we caught the guy in the end. And the old people actually helped."

"So what was Fraser's mistake?"

"He taught some of the old biddies some karate moves. You know, how to immobilize someone who's coming after you so you can run away. I kept telling him not to go too far with it, not to teach them any kicks or anything, but he said, 'oh, no, they could handle it.' So one of them decided she was Wonder Woman and went after a perp at a convenience store robbery. She tried to kick him but she lost her balance and went down. Fraser visited her in the hospital, but she never did recover." Ray paused. "I guess that wasn't really his fault."

"Not completely, but you had better judgment that time," Kevin said. "It seems to me that Fraser is so focused on the positive—on what people might be capable of doing—that he doesn't see their limitations."

"And, me, I'm the expert on the negative," Ray said with a wry little smile and a twinge of sadness.

"Don't put yourself down," Kevin said. "There's a place for a little realism in the world. So, why didn't you insist that what he was doing was wrong?"

"We have a pattern, you know? He says something, I object, and then he does it anyway. Did I tell you he almost drowned me

once?"

"No," Kevin said. "Where?"

"In a bank vault." Ray laughed to see Kevin's face. "It's true. I swear, the only reason we didn't die was pure luck. A couple more minutes and we would have been gone."

Kevin shook his head as if to clear it. "Some of these stories you tell me... Do you resent it that Fraser has put you in mortal danger so many times?"

Ray smiled and hung his head. "Yes and no. I get mad, all right. But he knows I'd do anything for him. I guess you're right that he ain't perfect, but that doesn't matter to me. All I want is for him to let me know what he's gonna do. I need for him to—" Ray wasn't sure how to say what he felt.

"Acknowledge your feelings?" Kevin prompted.

"Yeah," Ray said, relieved.

"Doesn't he ever listen to you?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, he listens." Ray paused, thinking. It seemed important to make Kevin understand. "It's not like he forces me into anything. Fraser is just different. It's like he *sees* what's right, almost like a vision or something, and he has to do it, even if he has to suffer for it. He gives up so much that it doesn't feel bad to follow him. He believes in people."

"You admire him a lot, don't you?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, I do," Ray said seriously, "and I finally know that I'm the only one who can make him happy. And that's what I want to do."

"What about your happiness?"

"All I need to be happy is to be there with him." Ray felt good just saying it. "It took me too long to figure that out, but it's true. It feels so good to make him feel good. I've never had that before. I mean, I've made people feel good, but..."

"You mean it used to be all about

your pleasure?" Kevin asked.

"No, that's not it. I guess I wanted them to feel good so I could pump myself up and know how good I was. With Fraser it's different. I just want him to feel good. I'd do anything he wants because he'd do anything I want. He even does stuff I don't know I want until he does it. I want to be like that for him."

Moving over his lover's body, Ray was watching Benny as hard as he could because he didn't want to forget any of this. Benny's hair was mussed and his face was—"loose" was the only word Ray could think of for it. That iron control was all gone, and a sheen of sweat covered his face. He was looking at Ray with wonder in his eyes, like a man who has suddenly understood something. They were together, and things were finally right. Together they were travelling to some unexplored place.

Benny clung to his shoulders, moaning softly, gasping out inarticulate sounds. Before, there had always been words between them, but now there was only this joining, this knowledge that passed through their skin, through their eyes. Ray knew that he wanted to spend the rest of his life making Benny feel this way.

"Ah, Benny," he murmured, "it's all for you, Benny...anything I have..." He knew he wasn't saying what he meant very well, but it didn't seem to matter, because Benny's blue eyes looked at him as if they would never look away.

Tonight, Ray was giving himself up as much as Benny was. The boundaries between them were erased. And Ray no longer maintained his little reserve of doubt, his indifferent observer standing off to one side. He let go of it all: the egotism, the superiority, the fear. He put all of himself into this act, and by doing so he forgot himself. All Ray knew, with the shred of intellect he still had left, was that he'd never felt happier in his life.

"Ray?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking." Ray's heart was racing. He ran a hand over his face and it

came away damp.

"Our time is almost up. But it sounds as if you're pretty committed to this relationship."

"Absolutely," Ray said, with the air of someone taking a pledge.

"So, now you need to ask yourself, are you willing to do the work you'll need to do to keep it? How are you going to maintain the relationship long-distance?"

Ray shrugged. "What can I do? I'll wait out the time. In two months I'm going up there. Meanwhile, I've got work to concentrate on. Even with Fraser's help I'm behind on my cases, and everyone's still pissed off at me because they had to carry my workload while I was gone." He snorted. "Like I was in Hawaii or something, right? I was working harder than all of them put together."

"I wasn't just talking about the time."

"I know," Ray said earnestly. "I gotta stop with the jealousy and the temper. I need to change. It's just that I...I'm not sure where to start, how to do it."

"Ray," Kevin said almost gently, "did Fraser ask you to change? Did he tell you there were things he didn't like about you?"

"No, but I can tell from the way he—"

"Did he say it?"

Ray thought for a second. "No, not like that."

"Haven't you always had a temper?"

Ray hung his head. Now they were getting to it. To be honest, the whole idea of trying to change himself scared him because he didn't really think he could do it. "Yeah, always."

"You've known Fraser a long time. Hasn't he seen your temper before?"

"Lots of times. I don't know how he stands it. Where are you going with this?" Ray asked impatiently. "I know I have some problems."

"Not as many as you think. Listen—I'm not recommending that you shout at Fraser all the time, but I think it's safe to say he accepted your temper a long time ago. He knows who you are and he cares for you anyway."

Ray was silent, looking at him strangely, afraid to believe. But it made sense. "He's transferring down here in six months," he said hoarsely.

"Wow," said Kevin, smiling. "You see? I think what you said at the beginning of the session is true."

"What did I say?"

"That you already let the Bookman go. You're not the Bookman, Ray, and you never really were. A man like that is hollow inside. He has no empathy for any living thing."

"Then why did it feel so good sometimes to be him?" Ray asked painfully.

"I think you were in so much pain that you didn't want to feel anything anymore. You tried on the existence your father wanted for you and..." He paused.

"And, what?" Ray asked expectantly.

"And it didn't really fit. You said before that the Bookman was an empty shell. Well, you weren't. You just climbed into his and tried it on for size."

The rightness of what Kevin had said seemed to flow into Ray's body in a rush of warmth. "I know that," Ray said, his voice breaking on the words. "I've always known that. But it feels really good to hear you say it."

Kevin smiled. "You do have some work ahead of you, Ray. I'm not letting you off the hook that easily. When you talked about that gay guy before, the one you knew in high school, I was worried that maybe your sexuality was one of the things you were hiding from when you played the Bookman. You need to think through your attitude about leading a gay lifestyle. You need to face some truths about what judgments society might pass on you and learn to feel good about yourself anyway."

"Yeah," Ray said, "I don't know what

we're gonna do if someone finds out, but I kind of put off thinking about it. I figured we'd just deal with stuff as it came. It scares me. I know it's hell on wheels being outed when you're a cop, but right now it makes me so happy to be with him I just don't want to think what might happen."

"Do you trust him to stand by you?"

"Totally, and that's the thing. I don't really have doubts about him. If anything, I doubt me."

"That I might be able to help with," Kevin said.

"So I want to keep coming to these appointments." It was hard to ask for help, but Ray knew that stopping now would be about the stupidest thing he ever did.

Kevin smiled as he handed Ray the appointment card, and Ray thought back to when he used to think of Kevin as a spike-haired punk, as an adversary rather than as someone who was trying to help. It was strange to have someone understand so well what he was going through, strange and humbling. Ray was still clinging to the comfort of Kevin's words. *You never were the Bookman. You tried it on and it didn't fit.* It was true, he knew it was. And he was grateful that Kevin had figured it out. With all the baggage in his head, he might never have seen it himself in a million years.

Ray walked out of Kevin's office into the empty waiting room and paused by the mirror to fix his tie. He was still deep in the thoughts that the session had evoked. For one of the only times in his life, he had hope for the future. He remembered feeling like this just before he found out that Irene was leaving him. He didn't think he'd felt this way since, and it felt good, but it also hurt, as if he was using muscles he hadn't flexed in a long, long time.

His tie was straight, but still he gazed into the mirror. There was one

question Kevin hadn't asked. Who was Ray Vecchio? Ray wasn't sure he could answer that one, but suddenly he wanted to try.

Ray Vecchio was just a guy, an ordinary guy who had been to hell and back. He'd changed a few ideas, made a few compromises, over the last couple of months. He'd shed his skin—the Bookman's skin—and come out lighter, happier, more himself than he ever was.

He could get through this. He and Fraser both could. It was autumn now. In spring Benny would be back again. In spring, the dark ground would sprout with new life. Ray could picture it, and he could picture Fraser coming back, riding a dogsled, taking a bus, then an airplane. It was going to happen. Ray wiped his brow and tucked his handkerchief carefully into his breast pocket. He felt calmer than he had in months. Just knowing, with a clear, firm conviction, that Fraser would return opened something up inside him. Suddenly it all seemed so obvious, so easy. Ray sighed, and with that sigh released the anger and despair that had been his constant companions for longer than he could remember. He smiled at himself in the glass.

"So long, Armando Langoustini," Ray murmured, saluting the mirror, and he walked out into the open air.

The End

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Thanks...

Without Morgan Dawn's careful, critical, encouraging beta, this novel might never have been finished. Thanks to her, too, for our weekly conversations about *Due South* and for her own inspiring work. I'm as grateful for Laura Shapiro's beautiful artwork on the cover as I am for her insights into the *Due South* universe. Anne Fairchild's friendship and encouragement helped me keep things in perspective. And thanks to Kathy Resch for being the most patient editor in the world.